

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

# PLANET

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## stories

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Nic Cano was an FFV - but he'd seen  
too much horror on the new green world

### LAST RUN on VENUS

novelet by James McKimmey Jr.

also Ray Gallun ★ Bryan Berry

It was 40 years since the last G.C. spacer --- plenty can  
happen in an off-galaxy world in that length of time!

TEMPTRESS of PLANET DELIGHT

a startling novel by B. CURTIS

Anderson



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# PLANET STORIES



VOL. 5, No. 12

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

MAY, 1953

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T. T. SCOTT, *President*

JACK O'SULLIVAN, *Editor*

MALCOLM REISS, *Mgr. Editor*

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## THE VIZIGRAPH

DAMP and cold though England may be at this season, poor Bryan Berry, our 3-in-1 author, must be roasting from the heat of invective heaped upon him of late. Fen of the Cosmos-mind have read the written word, penetrated the Berry cerebellum, and unsheathed their J-guns for the instant-kill. Others—to be fair about the matter—have thrown wide their generous arms and embraced the author via the Venus-kiss.

Con and pro; bad and good; so go the comments from 'round the globe (and darnit, still not a letter from "way out there"). We-thinks Mr. Berry rates a whack at the scribblers; and wethinks Mr. Berry might tell us a bit more about himself and his cogitatin', and anything else that he so chooses. So off to the British Isles goes a set of Vizi-proofs while these columns wait unknowing for the retort.

From time to time we've printed letters of a somewhat personal nature: old mags for sale; convention-date notices; etc. Many readers have taken objection to the cluttering of these columns with such trivia, and we are inclined to agree. For the facts are that if we print one we are obliged to print all, and limited space just does not permit this. So hereafter, all such items shall be expunged from letters. Please bear with us in this matter.

Illustration winners hit the wire in this order: (1) Janet Hathaway; (2) Robby Flowers; (3) Bill Tuning.

OUCH!!!

1517 Lincoln Ave.,  
Calumet City, Ill.

Dear Editors:

For some time I have refrained from complaining again about the condition of my magazines, not wishing to become tedious; and I will keep this brief. I definitely intend to not renew my subscription to your magazine. The method by which you post your issues is execrable. All other pulp-size magazines cover their rolled-up issues COMPLETELY with kraft paper. My issue of PLANET has about two inches of top and bottom exposed. Certainly it isn't so costly that you can't afford to cover the magazine. And other magazines have the subscriber's name printed upon the paper. My name is handprinted, which seems to me to denote either a derailing of the 'zine, or a terribly primitive subscription department. And that's that!

There is one defect in all letter departments of science-fiction magazines. We get a lot of "I-like-it's" and a few other general praises, that I am quite sure that the majority of STF authors do not read the columns. They would like to read honest and specific criticisms of their works. Fen are mostly unintelligible in this and either wildly criticize with little or no reasons, or they praise adolescently because of an artificial "adulthood" (a pet phrase for readers who have no other vocabulary) or because of sex or other trivial reasons. I shall, in the following, attempt to give an honest opinion and criticism of your new writer Bryan Berry. I hope the author can criticize MY criticism justifiably.



Of the three short stories, **THE FINAL VENUSIAN** is the one story I believe shows the least amount of stereotype. Besides the almost shocking resemblance to Bradbury's **DWELLERS IN SILENCE**, Berry has practically no style, and little deviation from the accepted criterion of pulp writers.

Pulp writers show an almost absurd affinity towards the poetic. It is a defect in itself since barely a few writers in the world today can accomplish this practice and be successful from it. The pulp writers' tool is emotion. They do not attempt to control it. This may be verified by producing the example of Mr. Berry's short story. In all STF stories, the wind doesn't blow or roar. It "whispers." Any competent reader can easily judge, and accordingly discard all stories that use this age-old device.

Let us look at this in Mr. Berry's story. Such trite combinations as "the city slept," "The white towers of the city pointed . . . like skeleton fingers," "rockets . . . burning the clouds with . . . fire," and etc. . . . The descriptions of the characters, nearly reaches the farce stage: "eyes the palest blue steel," "bushy shocks of hair," and "teeth that were . . . pearls."

I shall mention again the fact that this story is a direct print of the former Bradbury story, which is surprising considering that **PLANET** printed the story in the first place. The difference between the two is that Bradbury had no duplicate to copy from, and that his ideas were original, and for the most part unusual in the field. And he wrote with a delicate pen, eliminating the obvious girlishness that this type of story could evolve into; and the "poesy" is entered with such a fluid motion, that one is not offended by the strange similes and metaphors.

Similar to Bradbury, (comparing the other two stories also, now) Berry has a fixation upon the romantic. He thinks it romantic to place his characters in a desolate situation, and having them end up living a lonely life. This is a very strict emphasis upon melancholia, which is the most potent of all the human emotions, probably the basic reason for Bradbury's success. I do not believe the public will favor a direct repetition of this theme.

Mr. Berry does not merit a longer or more thorough analysis, nor could this writer attempt to extend the length of this letter through additional criticisms. I would advise the editor to warn the author of the triple-shots, of the dangers of stealing story plots from other authors.

Back to PS now. Enough of this stuff. Your covers are still in pitiful condition, but the inside illustrations are increasing in quality comparable with the standards of pulp illustrating. Other improvements would be; the destruction and non-printing of letters asking for back-number magazines (I am quite sure that **PLANET** is not a vehicle for advertisements), a deletion of letters re Miss Cox's, which publicize so called "fan" clubs and the like, there being a profusion of amateur publications whose sole purpose is the latter; and a further chopping up of epistles that list the contents of the previous mag.; accompanied by such brilliant statements as "good," "it smelt," "his character was cute," and so on.

Your omission of late, of the small advertising among the rear pages is a great stride in lifting the quality of your format. Also I plead that you request Mr. Fress from refraining from drawing the picture of the type for **AMOUR, AMOUR, DEAR PLANET**. The nude woman beckoning (representing Space) to the spaceship, And/or spaceman, is exceedingly unoriginal to say the least. And PLEASE see if it is possible to work out better cover paintings.

Gardner Fox's story makes one sorry that he has paid money for this: It shows the main weakness in

the blood-and-thunder STF tale; the ability of the reader to himself finish the story upon completion of two pages of said work. I have read western stories whose quality is decidedly above the level of the **WARLOCKS**, and of STF in general, for that matter.

Congratulations to Dave Hammond for briefly stating my feelings and criticisms of Bryan Berry (which sounds like a pseudonym if I have ever heard one).

Thanking you for your patience in reading my letter,

Yours sincerely,

PHILIP BRANTINGHAM

Ed's note: Will my face be red if Berry fails to come through.

#### 60-DAY HANDICAP

385 North 8th St.  
Provo, Utah

Dear Jack:

Glad to see you've begun the year right with those super-scintillating stories! Yup, the Jan. ish was ok even if we do get it in the middle of November. Whose impossibly brilliant idea, was it in the first place to have all the mags come out a month or two in advance?

(Oh, so *that's* the way it was! My half-cracked professor friend just let me in on the secret. Very hush-hush you know).

Once upon a time there was a fan. Now he wasn't just any gregarious, simple-minded fan, he was a full-fledged **ACTIFAN**! He hadn't acquired the title of BNF yet, but he was working at it. Now this fan read every STF mag as soon as it hit the stands—sooner if he had a sub. (plug) But, since he read so fast and, in those days, there weren't as many STF mags as there are now, hours passed when he didn't have a single thing to read!

Now one day he met this old professor, who was only one-quarter cracked then, and he solved the fan's problem very simply: he built him a time machine. With this very necessary article he went into the future a couple of months and bought every STF mag he could find. After he had read them all he thought it was such a good idea, and he was such a smart boy that he immediately became the editor of one of the leading STF mags and published all said mags two months in advance so he would never be caught short again. Of course he was so busy after that he never had much time for reading anyway, but he did the **UFA** a great service. We will never forget him. Now we can read all our STF mags two months in advance! (And what happened to the half-cracked professor? Oh, you meet him once in awhile—he crops up every now and then in a story. Great guy).

If we rate the stories from 1 to 10 (the lower the number the better the story, of course) they would come out something like this:

WAR DRUMS OF MERCURY LOST . . . . .	2
DESIGN FOR GREAT-DAY . . . . .	4
THE SUN-DEATH . . . . .	4.5
GROUNDLING . . . . .	6
OH MESMERIST FROM MIMAS . . . . .	6.5
THE FINAL VENUSIAN . . . . .	7
THE IMAGINATIVE MAN . . . . .	7.5

Mr. Jack O'Sullivan, we the **UFA** (United Fen of America) have got you at last. Convicted by your own words, too.

Quote:

THE VIZIGRAPH

Heedeth the words of man, woman and robot.

Unquote . . .

(Continued on page 108)



KELLY FREAS





# TEMPTRESS OF PLANET DELIGHT

By B. CURTIS

*A sears-monkey flew to vend his wares  
On a planet strangely groomed.  
Lo and behold, he lost all his cares  
As the genetic experiment bloomed.*

**W**HEN the alarm signalled the first whiff of the atmosphere of the next planet on his route, Herl Hofner stopped chinning by his strapping six-foot self and left the little gym. Slipping into the swivel chair at the desk he clipped the pile of loose papers into an empty niche at the side of the desk, spun the chair around to the instrument panel of the *Krylla*. Dialing with his left hand, he swept the bank for incoming signals while his



right hand adjusted the microphone frequencies.

"Class M-for-Mary ship requesting permission to land. Do you have automatic beam landing device? Class M-for-Mary ship requesting permission to land. Do you have automatic beam landing?" His dial pointer swept back and forth.

"Come in, class M-for-Mary."

Hert's left hand moved to the autobeam switch. "What band for M-for-Mary landing? What band for M-for-Mary landing?"

"Come in on seventy-three point eight, M-for-Mary. Come in on seventy-three point eight, M-for-Mary."

Hert's left hand now centered the needle neatly on the appropriate setting as his right pressed the stud for extending the wings with their powerful atmosphere motors; and he sank back into the chair cushions with a relieved sigh. This was still a civilized planet. He'd be able to get back maybe a month sooner than he'd expected after the most recent setback. Forty years, he frowned, was too long between visits from Galactic Central, even if Central had no responsibility for autonomous groupings. A lot could happen in forty years on these isolated planets. The unprecedented mutation leaving half the population deaf and dumb had made the last call a long and tedious one. But by the signs so far, this planet was still ticking along satisfactorily with radio and radar and standard language, a spaceport and all the comforts of civilization.

The speaker hummed into activity. "Please state vessel name, registration, number of crew, destination, and nature of business, M-for-Mary entering on band seventy-three point eight."

Hert grinned comfortably to himself. Familiar red tape had a homelike ring. "This is the *Krylla*, registered J-John five two L-Lomax one five on Earth Sol at headquarters of Galactic Coordination, on routine round trip of thirty planets carrying only Captain Hert Hofner, your sears-monkey, to governmental centers for trading coordination."

He heard the snort from the speaker before the bellow. "What in seven light years is a sears-monkey?" He could visualize the veritable bull of a man at the port control tower.

"Traditional term on Earth for a trading

catalogue, now used to signify the man who carries it. I've got five hundred thousand feet of microfilm of the latest manufactured articles and raw materials and their descriptions and prices from about three thousand planets in the galaxy. Anything you need?"

"I don't know. Nobody tells me anything." A pause. "How long do you wish to remain on Delight?"

"That depends on what's needed and how long it takes me to find out. How long has the planet been called Delight? I have it listed as Geescow, or maybe that was my predecessor's idea of a joke."

"That was no joke. We only settled here eighty years ago and there was a little bug in the water that made the whole place stink like a garbage scow. We've got that pretty well cleaned up and renamed the place." Another pause. "Do you need hotel accommodations?"

Hotel. Hert felt his chin. He'd better redepil on the way down. Sears-monkeys were expected to go the local culture one better on everything to keep up Galactic Coordination's reputation. And he should wear the red dress uniform tunic and black trou. The more civilized they were, the harder they fell for a little routine glamor.

"How far is the port from the capital?"

"Not more'n ninety, hundred miles from the middle of town. Plenty of taxi service for the little bit of business we get here. Only twelve spaces and eighty-three jets registered for the whole planet."

Well, that explained the volubility of the control man. Evidently just busting for somebody to talk to. Not first-class security, being so gabby, but pleasant to come in out of the black to.

"I may need an office where I can play the samples. Can you get me something?"

"No. You gotta have a clearance permit to rent, a commercial visa, a set of ration cards for food . . . do you need one for clothes? . . . a transportation permit to hire a vehicle . . . an application blank for health examination, an application for personal insurance, vehicle insurance, theft insurance, credit bonding, driver's license, secretarial assistance (will you need a secretary?), and, the most important of the kaboodle, application for permission to make additional applications for permission."



"Leaping Luna! I don't expect to be here longer than a couple of weeks at the most. I don't need clothes unless the ones I have are offensive to your planetary taboos; and I certainly don't need a secretary. Can't I just hire a cab and let the driver worry about the insurance and driver's license and all the rest of that stuff?" Herl mentally withdrew his grin at the comfort of red tape. "I can eat food from the ship if I have to."

"Can't unload any food without special permission two weeks in advance of unloading date to give time for federal inspection." The heavy voice was firm if regretful. "You'd better just pick up this book of forms and fill them out while you wait for clearance to enter the city."

"Clearance," Herl almost yelped. "How long will that take?"

"Depends. You might be able to get it in four, five hours if the video bands are fairly free. You're almost down now. Don't forget the 1.3 earth gravity. Buckle your belt: the field's jet-pitted and you're coming in on wheels. Be seeing you."

HERL was still seeing him six hours later, sitting across a castered utility table from almost exactly the bull of a man he'd visualized . . . about Herl's own height but broader all the way from shoulders to beam. Where he'd half expected a close-cropped head, however, the tower man, Saem Berry, wore his hair in ragged brown locks falling almost to his jacket collar.

Herl had looked up at him curiously in the midst of asking a question relevant to a three-page form describing his employment status and waiving unemployment compensation during his stay on Delight.

"Let my barbering permit lapse," admitted Berry, sheepishly. "Can't re-apply for six more months, so I have to hack it off when it gets in my way."

"Earth months or Delight months?" Herl asked as he wrote.

"Delight months. That's about a year and a half, earth time." Saem Berry opened the desk drawer and took out a pair of office shears. Holding his head over the wastebasket he snipped off a few of the longer strands; then he sat up and replaced the shears. "Good thing I learned to shave myself."

Filling out forms and returning to the *Krylla* for a snack had taken only five of the six hours; waiting for vizor connections had taken the last hour along with a game of tri-di chess to kill the time. Berry had been surprisingly uncommunicative about the state of Delight culture and technology.

"Better see it for yourself," he'd said. "I don't know half of what goes on in town, living way off here."

He had been politely curious about Herl and Herl's job.

"Go around from planet to planet and system to system selling stuff, eh?" He tilted his head at the captain. "What made a smart young fellow like you want to wander around the galaxy instead of settling down to a steady job and raising a family? Lot of money in it, or are you staying away from something you don't like?" he asked penetratingly.

Herl responded in kind. "Don't know as I ever thought of it just that way," he admitted. "I guess I like to see things getting tied together in some sort of organization. I like to see people getting what they want and need . . . and I'm good at it. There's no great income in it. Maybe I just like going from place to place and seeing how things are there."

"Looking for something you need yourself, I'll bet. Got a girl?" the controlman grinned slyly.

"No girl," Herl grinned back. "Do the girls on Delight need a man like me? I might be able to arrange for a shipload."

Saem shook his head. "I've got a daughter," he said, "who yearns for far places . . . marriageable gal . . . I'm always on the lookout." He laughed. "That's the kind of thing she'd say, not me, the little brat."

"Do I have to get a special permit to take her to dinner?" Herl asked, just as the vizor connection was completed.

The major official in a conservative blue tunic, who looked like half the civil officers in the galaxy, peered apologetically out of the screen. "You can come right to my office in the city, Captain Hofner," he urged. "I'll get some of our leading men together to meet you at once. I understand you're a busy man. Uh . . . have you all your applications filled out?"

The towerman assented quickly for Hof-

ner, "Yes indeed, Mr. Commissioner. He's alone and planning to stay only a few weeks, so he didn't need most of the big ones like permanent housing or shopping assignment or resident tax registration and like that. Will you be sending a temporary driver for him till he's got his permit?"

"Oh, yes. I'll send a man out as soon as I can clear one."

Saem's tone was deferent. "Thank you, Mr. Commissioner." The connection was broken and the screen went dark. "Pretty obliging guy, Commissioner Crawford. He doesn't forget a thing. Never has. That's an impressive record." The controlman nodded his head; his hair swung down over his eyes; and he fumbled in the drawer for the scissors again. "Now I'd forget my head if it wasn't dogged down."

"It can't be that bad," Herl objected.

"Right again," the other admitted. "That's a joke around here at any rate. You can't afford to forget anything around here."

"I won't forget," smiled Herl.

"You'd better not. It would be awkward as hell if you did and got stuck here."

"They couldn't hold me here just for forgetting something. I'm an employee of Galactic Coordination, you know, and not a local citizen."

The brown locks swung from side to side. "I don't know but I wouldn't risk it. It might be a good many years, from what you tell me, before anybody came out from the Sol system looking for you if they're as understaffed as you say."

"I'll be careful, then." And Herl Hofner patted his pile of applications and turned back to the chess game.

THE driver of the cabter was even less communicative about the state of things on Delight. Captain Hofner tried to get him to talk about what the planet might be able to use in the manufactured line but the young driver only pursed his lips and shook his head slowly and said, "I don't know a thing about it and I can't afford to forget that I don't get paid for looking around and then griping about it. Commissioner Crawford will tell you what you want to know. He gets paid for it." And he would say no more.

Crawford sounded like quite the little despot. Herl shivered in the open cabter as it plowed through a thin cloud and turned up the heating element in his scarlet uniform tunic. The driver seemed very thinly clad, but he gave no sign of being cold except for a whiteness around the lips and fingers.

"Don't you draw enough clothing ration here? Maybe Delight will be in the market for synthetic fabrics if you're short here."

The young man turned a look of fury on Hofner. "None of your damn business if I haven't got enough clothes and I wouldn't say anything about it to Crawford either if you know what's good for you!"

Hofner shrugged, and the silence held till after the cab had alighted on the outskirts of the city and proceeded through a number of blocks of moderate-sized residences and stores. Realizing the probable public pride of the driver, Herl made no mention of the occasional fetid whiffs that blew through the cabter reminding him that Delight had once been called Geescow, but instead turned his attention to the city. The houses were brick or stone boxes, solidly built, drab-colored, set behind lawns of silvery gray mossy looking stuff. Great trees lined the street at precise intervals: the pavement, though lightly serrated for friction, was as smooth as the newest roads on Earth. Hofner noticed that the cabter stopped automatically at certain intersections and was obviously equipped with a radar braking device. Technicians here might have something to list in the catalogue.

Suddenly the driver stiffened in his seat, slammed on the cab's own brakes and swore simultaneously. "Those blankety blank damned irresponsible Eyefers!" He leaned out of the window and yelled, "Where in hell do you think you're going? Do you want to get killed?"

Hofner, who had been looking at the buildings on his side of the street, looked out the front of the cab and saw a vacant-faced, middle-aged woman almost touching the bumper. She turned her head at the driver's voice, looked at him as if she hardly saw him, and walked slowly to the opposite kerb. The driver pulled in his head and muttered under his breath, "They ought to declare an open season on Eyefers around here."

They'd just as soon smash up a good cab as get killed."

"What's an Eyefer?" Herl asked, hoping to get some crumb of information from the surly young man.

"Short for 'I fergot,'" answered his companion brusquely.

"I fergot what?"

The reply was bitterly sarcastic. "Fergot to get a license, Fergot to get the next ration card, Fergot to apply for compensation . . . Fergot to do practically anything but eat . . . and be a drag on everybody else. I got three of them myself to look out for and if I don't look out I'll be going Eyefer myself and then what?"

"All right, then what?"

The young man clenched his teeth, thinned his lips. "There won't be any 'then what.' I'd hang myself."

Concealing his startlement, Herl asked as coolly as he could, "Tell me about these Eyefers. We don't have them where I come from and I can't say I exactly understand the score."

"No Eyefers, huh. Ask Crawford." And the driver clenched his teeth again and drove on. Herl was unable to get anything more out of him until the cabter turned and drew up a long ramp into the side of a pretentious pseudo-Greek edifice that filled a whole block.

"Civil Building. Crawford's office is here. Straight ahead," he stopped the cabter beside a gateway in the railed concrete walkway paralleling the road, which apparently went clear through the building, "and take the fourth elevator to your right. Crawford has the whole sixth floor."

Herl grabbed his case full of credentials and applications, opened the door, and stepped onto the walkway. He turned to thank the driver, but the cab was already gathering speed along the way.

## II

HE LOOKED after the dwindling cab a moment, then walked quickly along the concrete toward the elevators. To his left, a procession of assorted vehicles hurried in either direction through the tunnel. Occasional cabters, long-cars, and congyribles pulled up to openings in the railing to

let out passengers who approached one or another of the elevator doors. Herl passed three clumps of people waiting for transportation to other floors and noticed that the panels beside the doors, which listed the offices to be found on the ninth, eighth, and seventh floors respectively, were all listings of headquarters of some sort of civil control . . . health insurance, building permits, fire inspection, inoculations, etc.

There were both men and women among those waiting, most of them in what Earth would call informal dress (a pair of simple trousers and knitted shirt in gray or brown, often topped off with a heavy furred cape or swathing capelike coat); and most of them were much more warmly dressed than the driver of his cab. Apparently there was not such a shortage of heat-holding fabrics as he had assumed.

As he reached the fourth elevator, the door opened and the group was sucked into its recesses. Herl joined it and the doors closed. "Express to the sixth floor: face the rear of the car please," said the tinny voice from an overhead speaker. Twenty people stood glumly motionless as the car glided up with the faintest of vibrations but with a heavy pressure against the soles of Captain Hofner's feet.

A door opened at the rear of the elevator chamber and the crowd pushed out and spread wide in the large lobby ahead. Herl Hofner shifted his case to his left hand and looked around for some clue to the whereabouts of Crawford's office. That worthy might have the whole floor, but he must have his particular sanctum at some particular place.

Most of the lobby was filled by comfortable looking upholstered couches and chairs, and these in turn were filled by what Herl judged to be a couple of hundred people talking, reading pamphlets, or glancing preoccupiedly through pages of forms that looked like the ones he'd filled out earlier. In a chair near him, Herl saw an old man gazing blankly ahead and approached him.

"I wonder if you would be so good as to tell me where I could find Commissioner Crawford," he requested hopefully.

"What say?" the man blinked and turned his gaze on the red uniform jacket at about the level of Herl's floating ribs

"Where would I find Commissioner Crawford?"

"Down that way somewhere, I suppose." The man's voice was toneless as he indicated direction with one elbow.

Yes, almost at the corner of the room was a broad paneled door on which the stencilled name Mr. Commissioner A. G. Crawford became legible as Herl approached it. He knocked briskly just below the letters; and the door swung slowly inward to admit him.

Inside sat a receptionist at a switchboard. She looked up at Herl's entrance; and he could see that she was a homely brunette with dull skin and a shapeless figure. Her glance at his trim scarlet uniform was approving and she said, "You're Captain Hofman from Galactic Information, aren't you?"

"Hofner, from Coordination," he corrected. "May I see the Commissioner? I believe he's expecting me."

"The Commissioner is in conference at the moment with some of the men he wants you to talk to. If you could wait in the lobby a few minutes, I'm sure he'll be ready to see you soon."

"Can't I wait in here?"

"I'm afraid not," she replied reluctantly. "It's a rule that no one can wait in the offices. They'd be filling the place to the ceiling if we let them get in this far. Not," she added with what she seemed to think was a fascinating smile, "that you'd try to get in ahead of your turn . . . but some would."

HERL retreated with his case of papers to the lobby and took the nearest of two vacant chairs about fifteen feet from Crawford's door. He sat down and pulled a stilo and permanote pad from his breast pocket. Using his case as a writing desk he noted down several questions he wanted to ask somebody. There were vacant planets in his catalogue: maybe he had a market for one of those: and while there wasn't any commission on such a 'sale', there was usually a lot of kudos.

He glanced up at Crawford's door again, and a motion on his left drew his eye. There was someone in the chair next to him only ten feet away . . . a woman, no, a girl.

The thought flitted through his mind that she was a quiet one to slip into the chair without his noticing. She was looking at him, and he turned his head to look directly at her.

Shock like a heavy charge of electricity gripped and tingled in him. This was no girl, it was a . . . a . . . who knows what. Wrapped in a thin golden haze, she sat, as if in the midst of an incandescent cloud, through which her face shone as if it, too, were illumined from inside. One bare arm lay along the upholstered arm of the chair, but not quite touching it, as though the cloud gave a little support; but the perfect arm was merely the lower frame for the exquisitely lovely face with its blue eyes that seemed to penetrate his awareness to its depths and the smile that smoothed his irritation at another tedious wait into nothingness.

Herl sat and regarded her a long instant, a foreverness of perhaps ten seconds. Then he came fumblingly to himself and smiled back at her. "Waiting for Crawford, too?" he asked lamely.

The tones of her voice were rippling water, a chord on a stringed instrument. "No."

Herl had a moment of ridiculous longing to stand up and see over the thick arm of the chair to find out what the rest of her looked like. Then embarrassment came and he lowered his eyes. "Excuse me," he apologized, "I'm a stranger to Delight. I didn't mean to pry."

The voice was two tones of a flute. "I know."

"By the uniform?" He raised his eyes again to look at hers.

"By everything." The smile faded, replaced by a look of sober gravity.

Questions raced through Herl's mind: who she was; what the cloud was; what she knew about him; even what she was wearing, for the cloud thickened near the shoulder and neck and he could glimpse only a few shining strands of waving amber hair through the concealing haze.

"You may ask me," she said.

"Ask you what?" he returned, surprised.

"Any of those questions. I will tell you."

Crawford's door opened and the receptionist came toward them. One thought rose imperatively in Herl's mind.

"Will you be here when I come out?"

"No."

He grasped his case and got up. He could see now that she was literally wearing nothing but the half-concealing haze that left her slim legs and bare feet visible. "Will I . . . can I . . . see you again?"

"Yes."

Hert turned his head toward the receptionist.

"Commissioner Crawford can see you now," she smirked.

He looked back to ask the vision when and how he would find her but the chair was as empty as when he came out of the office.

CONFUSED, like a man suddenly awakened from a fascinating dream, Hert walked after the receptionist through the outer door and to the inner one. She returned to her switchboard and he went on toward the door, which slid into the wall at his approach. He gave his head a quick clearing shake and looked inside the long, austere, uncarpeted office, with its one window at the far end.

Directly ahead of him was a group of men sitting on both sides of a long conference table . . . little men, serious-faced, important, earnest. At the far end, a man faced him . . . a small, pleasant, but harried-looking middle-aged man, almost bald. Hert identified his outline against the window as that of Commissioner Crawford of the vizor call.

"Come in, Captain Hofner," the Commissioner invited cordially.

Hert did so and looked curiously at the sober faces of the men at the table while the door slid shut behind him.

"Come and sit down," Crawford indicated with his palm the empty chair at Hert's end of the table. His voice was still mellow and cordial. "We are all ready to discuss your officers and see your samples. You will find that we are accustomed to doing business promptly on Delight . . . an agreeable feature of our culture, I think you'll find."

Hert smiled, pulled out the heavy chair and sat, pulling it back to the table as he did so. Promptness would indeed be an agreeable feature after those deaf mutes. He put his case upon the table.

"I didn't bring the tapes and films with me from the ship, gentlemen," he apologized. "They seem to have exceeded the weight limit which I could bring into town without special permission. I suppose I shall have to have all these papers approved before I can show you what we have to sell." He opened the case and slipped out the stack of applications. "However, I can make a preliminary survey of your needs and what you have that you'd like an extra-planetary market for." He reached into his jacket pocket for stilo and pad.

A bell sounded beyond the door, which opened; and the receptionist stuck her head into the room.

"Miss Haulwell, would you be good enough to get a special messenger to take these papers around to the proper offices and get 'em stamped?" Crawford gestured to the stack. He scribbled on a pad by his hand, tore off the sheet and held it out. "This will give my authorization for complete clearance."

The shapeless Miss Haulwell came meekly around the table and took the note, then returned to the other end to pick up the pile of applications, handling them almost reverently. "Yes, Commissioner. Will there be anything else, Commissioner?"

"No, not at the moment."

She retreated silently to her anteroom and the door closed.

Just as the door clicked shut, Hert saw the golden haze thickening slowly behind the seated Crawford . . . thickening and then fading to nothing as if a cloud had changed its mind about coming into being. Staring beyond the man, Hert missed the beginning of the sentence, but picked it up before the meaning was lost.

" . . . have been discussing some of the things we need. We'd be interested in seeing any electronic calculating equipment developed in the last eighty years. And our requirements for reducing and storing records, particularly photographic records, have so far exceeded our production of file and development chemicals that we are definitely in the market for such . . . or any different improved methods. That's right, isn't it, Mr. Jerrip? (Mr. Jerrip is our Commissioner of Records.)"

A man down the table on Hert's left nod-

ded agreement. "Exactly right, Mr. Commissioner." His tone was most respectful.

Herl made a note on his pad. "Those are some of the most popular numbers in our new listing. What next?"

"Well, we've been discussing the matter of permitting the use of plastic housing materials and if we can come to some agreement, we may be in the market for some plastic formulae and construction plans."

One of the men on Hofner's right grunted an objection.

"Housing Commissioner Ferguson, here, feels that as long as we can continue to supply the expressed demand, there is no need to plan any expansion."

Herl nodded agreeably toward Ferguson and suggested, "Since delivery on heavy items like hot molds for plastics can't be guaranteed in less than ten earth years, you might like to see what we have and reconsider your needs in terms of the next fifty. Our department is trying to get us sears-monkeys around more often than that, but we can't be sure of doing it unless planet-hopping becomes a lot more popular with the boys of the galaxy."

Ferguson grunted again. "In fifty years we probably won't need anything but barracks for Eyefers."

Most of the men at the table laughed, a little self-consciously, it seemed to Herl.

"How about those Eyefers?" Herl opened tentatively. "I don't quite understand about them but I gather they're something of a drag on your culture. We have a number of vacant planets. Would you be interested in sending off a gang of them to colonize? Would they be interested in going?"

A TALL man next to Ferguson spoke to Crawford. "How about it, Bert? My household would get along more smoothly with about six less mouths to feed and six less backs to cover."

A fat bearded man directly on Herl's left shook his head rapidly several times. "No, no, no, no!"

Crawford spoke noncommittally. "Commissioner Guildris of Health and Welfare objects."

Guildris stood up. "I certainly do. Not only are the Eyefers hardly competent to colonize anything but the whole success of our

cultural and genetic experiment hinges on their being here among us as an example of what we must avoid if we are to succeed as a race!" He sat down, plumph, on the air-cushion of his chair.

Crawford turned to Herl. "I can explain about the Eyefers while we are waiting for your things from the ship," he assured Herl. "They are really quite important in our scheme of things, as Guildris says."

Herl was startled. "You mean you're sending somebody for my things?" he wanted to know.

"Certainly, if you like. If you don't trust a man to get them, I'll go along with you and we can talk then."

Herl relaxed. "There may be a good many things you'll be interested in when you see the pictures," he said.

The members of the group suddenly seemed a little tense.

"For instance," Herl looked round the ring of faces so sober and intent, "how about entertainment and entertainers? There are nightclub bleepers, and grand opera troupes, carnivals, dancers, magicians, and bocko teams, theatrical companies, acrobats, and several thousand individual artists of various talents . . . all good, or Galactic Coordination wouldn't be listing them. What's your preference, gentlemen?"

Commissioner Guildris rose again, a heavy frown on his heavy features. Looks of disapproval were obvious on several other faces also, although one or two commissioners raised their eyebrows questioningly at Crawford.

"I would not presume, Captain Hofner," Guildris stated, "to condemn light entertainment for the peoples of the galaxy. It is, however, an occupation from which we have been able to shield our people for the time being. We have our own approved methods of relaxation and of temporary escape from the pressures of daily living; but these are mostly in the nature of solitary meditation and mechanical music."

Herl winced inwardly. These people would have been better approached by a non-humanoid robot than a red-blooded ter-ran boy. Six feet six of healthy hungry handsome salesman was wasted here. And Guildris would hardly go off on an extended sermon to a machine.



But a human audience was fair game for the paunchy commissioner. "The danger to our citizens, you understand, is not in escapism, even though that may have its own dangers. It is in the approval and possible emulation of individuals . . . individuals who, though talented, might not be truly fitted for survival here. We cannot tolerate . . . I repeat, we cannot tolerate public distress and public pressure when a public figure fails in his civic duties. Entertainers would be loved. The public would want to forgive them their lapses. This we cannot have."

Herl glanced with a ghost of a smile at one of the men who had raised his eyebrows at Crawford. "No dancers?" he said.

"No dancers," Crawford replied firmly, without giving the other a chance to answer.

Herl returned equally firmly to his task. "And how do you plan to pay for what you buy . . . by Galactic Credits . . . by man hours of assigned labor . . . or by barter? In other words, what do you want to sell among the stars?"

A suave looking man with oily hair and an oilier manner looked at Crawford. "May I, Mr. Commissioner?"

Crawford nodded. "Mr. Applegate, Commissioner of Raw Materials (and that includes labor of course) will answer that."

Applegate turned to smirk at Herl.

"We have on Delight, Captain Hofner, a rich supply of natural fuels, several strains of high-oxygen producing plants, and a most remunerative taxation system. We can sell or barter or even pay for our few needs, whichever proves most satisfactory to Galactic Coordination. We have an untapped reservoir of unskilled labor in our Eyefers, whom we have heretofore avoided exploiting but whom we can use if it seems desirable for the good of our planet. Does that answer your question?"

Herl nodded, surprised that such a prosperous people hadn't gone straight to Coordination for what they wanted years before.

Guildris of Health and Welfare added, "We are most fortunate in being a completely self-sustaining planet. In our abundance of natural foods and textile rawstuffs, we are probably capable of supporting twice our present numbers. That is why we are

able to make progress with the great genetic experiment now in progress here. Because it works actual hardship on no one!" he added proudly.

Herl looked at Crawford. "I suppose this experiment will be one of the things you'll tell me about when we go to get my things?"

"Of course," blandly.

"Another matter you might be considering while we are getting the tapes and films," Herl offered, "is transport. Have you enough home-owned space tonnage to carry your exports and imports; or would you be interested in purchase, rental, or simple contract for haulage? You will get your orders much more quickly, I hardly have to tell you, if you use your own ships; but there are a number of haulage companies around the galaxy which would be very glad of your business. And if you cared to send a representative to the nearest coordination center, he could bring you our listings every couple of earth years and return with your orders, so that you could be in much closer touch with what the galaxy has to offer in the way of raw materials, manufactured goods, technological advance, and markets." Herl looked inquiringly around the table.

The rotund Guildris stood up again. "I believe I may speak for all of us when I say that we are not overly anxious for increased contact with the galaxy at this point in our social development. A great deal of thought by some of our wisest men," he bowed to his colleagues pompously, "has been expended on making Delight a self-sufficient independent unit for the most worthy of purposes, the eventual improvement of our race. In a few more generations, we may have something to offer the galaxy . . . not to sell but to offer to the need of all other planets . . . a strain of *bomo sapiens* so selected as to be a hardy, keen, responsible and intelligent race of administrators and leaders of the galaxy. Because we have dedicated ourselves to this purpose, we must necessarily cut ourselves off from the pleasant interdependence of thriving trade until we are ready to market the noble fruits of our projected garden."

Guildris remained standing a moment, while a gentle handclapping from both sides of the table indicated that his remarks were,

indeed, the opinion of all those present.

Herl kept a grave face with the greatest effort. Going to run the galaxy in a few generations, were they? These little two-for-a-credit bureaucrats? Wanted a few little calculators to make themselves the final bosses of everything. He had seen a giant calculator . . . an electronic multi-brain, with fifty men coding information for it, preparatory to making the selection of a minor planetary economic advisor. It would be an interesting day when these little men came to Earth to take over. All this flashed through his mind while Crawford was rising to his feet.

"We shall be perfectly satisfied," said Crawford genially, "to have delivery of our small order made by any means you care to contract; but as you have heard, we are not interested in opening up Delight as a trade center, so we have no need for regular shipping service. Now I don't want to take these gentlemen's time with discussion of things they already know," he looked around the table, "so if that's all we can do now, I propose that we disband and meet again at sundown. That will give us two hours to go out to the ship and back. Are there any objections?"

The men were rising from their chairs.

Herl said, almost plaintively, "Doesn't anybody eat around here? Couldn't we add time for a meal?"

Crawford laughed. "I forgot you didn't have your ration card yet. Make that time one hour dark. If your papers aren't cleared yet, I'll stand you to a meal."

Herl stood also, and the men filed past him, shaking his hand as they went. Six commissioners who had not spoken during the meeting added their names and positions. The last to go was a Commissioner of Psychology and Psychiatry, to whom Herl said, "I'd like to see you before I leave here, Commissioner. I think I've been having hallucinations."

The man halted, still holding Herl's hand. "What sort of visions, my boy?"

Herl grinned. "A pretty girl in a golden fog. Probably just the result of months alone in a space ship."

The man sighed, relieved. "Oh, just a goddess. A local phenomenon. Think nothing more of it. Commissioner Crawford will

tell you all about that, too." He followed the others out.

A local phenomenon! Maybe that girl was the 'noble fruit' Guildris was talking about. If so, these people might have something after all.

### III

COMMISSIONER CRAWFORD had gone to a desk in one corner of the conference room and was rummaging in one of the drawers. "Better hunt up my guest permit for restaurants," he began, when a two-tone chime sounded and the screen of a large vizor against the wall lit up. "Excuse me," he said, sitting down in the desk chair facing the video. "Crawford speaking," he said distinctly.

A young man with a narrow pimply countenance and sparse lightish hair appeared on the screen. "Sub-commissioner Torrin of Highways and Vehicles," he identified himself.

"Yes, Mr. Torrin?"

"I have here a set of application papers with your request for special rapid clearance," Torrin said accusingly, holding up the sheaf of papers which Herl recognized, although it was now much thinner than when he had relinquished it to Miss Haulwell.

"That is correct. Don't tell me something's been omitted. This is urgent, Torrin."

"Nothing has been omitted, Commissioner; but your note calls only for clearance on papers for a Captain Herl Hofner," Torrin said curtly.

"Still correct. So?"

"There is also an application for driver's license here for a Miss Agnes Haulwell . . . and I've leafed down through the rest of the forms and there are several more in her name: cooking fats and oils; crimp yarn textile clothing; limited individual rental housing . . . and then there are others of the same type as requested for Captain Hofner. Did you mean to authorize these also? Is she accompanying Captain Hofner in his temporary stay here? If so, I hardly see why she should need a number of these."

Crawford groaned and replied ruefully, "Haulwell's my receptionist and secretary.

Obviously going Eyefer and near-criminal as well. Very discerning of you to have caught it." He sighed, "She was a good secretary, though. Wonder where I'll get another."

Torrin requested coldly, "What shall I do with the applications?"

"Approve Captain Hofner's and send the rest of his on through. I'll get Haulwell's fraudulent forms from you tomorrow and put through her Eyefer status officially then. I'm too busy now."

"Thank you, Commissioner." The screen went black.

Crawford's face when he turned back to Herl was tired and disgruntled. "That's the third girl in a couple of years. They just have no consideration for their jobs. She was the best of the three, too." He rifled some more papers in the drawer and came up with a small green card.

"Why didn't you tell him you meant to add her name to your note?" Herl asked curiously. "You could have given her a scolding or something, couldn't you?"

"Oh no. You don't understand. She might have married and had children and I wouldn't have been able to say a thing, or I'd have been an accessory after the fact." He pressed a button on his desk. "Being Chief Commissioner of Delight is a responsible and tough job, Captain. But we owe it to our children's children to make them a hundred times as responsible and tough."

The door opened and Agnes Haulwell advanced a few steps into the room. "You wanted me, Commissioner?"

"Yes, Miss Haulwell. You may leave now and go home and pack your things. I'll phone Placement to get an assignment for you, so you can go right there to turn in your permits when you've packed."

"P-placement, Commissioner?"

"Eyefer placement, Miss Haulwell. Sub-commissioner Torrin has just informed me about your having added a number of your personal applications to the rush approvals for Captain Hofner."

Agnes Haulwell turned pale, then began to tremble and burst into tears. "Oh, no, Commissioner. I . . . I couldn't. None . . . well almost none of those permits has really lapsed . . . I'm engaged . . . I just can't," she sobbed, "I mustn't . . . you can't . . . oh, I'll go to detention or . . . or . . . temporary

curtailment of privileges or anything, but you can't make me go Eyefer!" she wound up defiantly.

Crawford was seemingly regretful, gentle. "Had the housing permit lapsed? and the cooking fats? and the winter clothes?"

"Yes, but that was all. I forgot just those three. The others all had hours to run yet."

"I forgot, I forgot," Miss Haulwell, there's one thing you can't forget and that's that an adequate memory and constant attention is the mark of those fitted to survive. Now I'm very disappointed in you," his voice became more gentle as she sobbed anew, "but I would consider it a personal favor if you'd come in in the morning to show your successor how to operate the switchboard and doors and where the supplies are."

"OH! . . ." Miss Haulwell fairly shrieked and ran blubbering from the room.

Crawford said sadly to Hofner. "They never do come in tomorrow morning. It just shows they were Eyefer stuff from the beginning. I only wish we had some way of weeding them out before they reached adulthood, but we don't. Now let's go and eat. By the time we get back, your permits should be here."

THE restaurant was in the basement. Progress between tables had been slow as Commissioner Crawford acknowledged greetings from numerous small groups and introduced Captain Hofner. Finally, however, they were seated at a table for two at a corner of the yellow-brick walled room.

A brown-overalled waiter approached them.

"My guest permit," Crawford explained in loud clear tones, "is for cereal foods and fruit. But you're probably in the mood for breakfast anyway." He spoke to the waiter. "Bring him," he nodded at Herl, "one of your regular breakfasts. I'll have steak and mushrooms and mashed wathros . . . and how's the bean puree to start with? and enchil salad and thollet pudding for dessert. We'll both drink morgen."

To Herl he added, "Do you want your cereal hot or cold?"

"Hot, I guess, for this weather," replied the ravenous captain.

"Very wise. Hot cereal for my guest.

Here's the card."

The waiter took the card and scanned it carefully. "Cereal card. Very good, Commissioner." He departed on a zig-zag course among the tables.

Hertl was hungry and tired and furious at the commissioner for ordering a full and appetizing-sounding dinner, but he smiled a well-trained smile and got back to his business.

"This might be a good time for you to tell me about the Eyeferers, Commissioner. According to Miss Haulwell, it doesn't seem a very desirable condition to be in; and yet you don't want them to leave the planet. What's the story?"

"I'll have to start at the beginning and rush through eighty Delight years of history to tell you . . . that's about two hundred earth years.

"As you probably know, our people came here from Madrilune as volunteers to prevent overpopulation there. They were a picked group of urbanites accustomed to the benefits of social control and convinced that lack of sound economic policy integrated with the daily life of every citizen had been at the root of Madrilune's troubles. The shortages of basic necessities to be found on any raw planet were little greater here than they had been on crowded Madrilune . . . rationing was very strict and justice heavily enforced so that all might have their chance to survive.

"Delightites are hard workers; and in about twenty of our years there was an abundance of foodstuff, textiles, and housing; and, as Guildris told you, we're really most enviably situated."

"What about all this rationing now?" Hertl looked distastefully at the green card still lying on the table.

Crawford pocketed the card. "I'm coming to that," he replied.

"The Chief Commissioner at that time was a Buford Finchley; and the great experiment Guildris talked about was his idea. From the beginning here, there had been a certain small proportion of the population which consistently seemed unable to cope with the regulation of life which was necessary to a pioneer planet. Some of them starved when their private holdings failed; some of them became criminals when their

families were exposed to want, leaving themselves and their families to be supported by the remainder of the population. When there was finally plenty of food and clothing and shelter for everybody and an end to the rationing system was proposed, the wise Commissioner Buford saw that such an end would put the weaker citizens at the mercy of the acquisitiveness of the stronger and threaten the stronger by the latent criminality of the weaker. He reasoned that no one needs more than enough of the necessities of life and that submission to socially beneficial regimentation was the mark of the socially adapted, the fitted-to-survive in a civilized age. So he began the present program of the most extensive control of the necessities and luxuries of life and the Eyeferers were part of the natural result. They are the unfitted.

"They forget to apply for many of their types of rations: they forget the special ordinances for seasons and parts of the cities: they forget to re-register for all permits when they change their addresses: some of them even forget to earn enough to pay for both permits and food, and let the food go and get all the permits and have to be hospitalized for malnutrition . . . they're Eyeferers, too. They have a thousand excuses, but they all boil down to, 'I forgot.'"

Hertl objected, "But you don't segregate them as you would criminals."

"No, of course not. They haven't committed any crime, usually; and we have no intention of punishing them. They are simply recognized as incompetent to manage their own affairs, sterilized, and guardians appointed to look after and support them. We realize that we have no right to interfere between an individual and his personal goals unless that individual threatens the liberty of other individuals." Crawford spoke self-confidently but without any show of self-righteousness.

The waiter approached with a loaded tray and began to place the food on the table.

HERTL kept his gaze from the bowl of steaming gruel before him and the tremendous steak before his companion. "You don't interfere with them . . . you just take away their jobs and their motivations to be social and their obligations to be

human beings?"

Crawford started to reply: the waiter put the last dishes on the table and departed: Herl continued speaking hurriedly.

"I don't mean to sound critical of your experiment when I don't know the whole story yet . . . but I should think that Miss Haulwell's competence to manage her own affairs (since you say that she was the best of your last three secretaries) was hardly to be judged on the basis of one small set of lapses."

"I'll talk about that in a moment," Crawford said, rising. "But first if you'll just change places with me. I haven't been able to eat this sort of thing for years," he waved at the full dinner, "since a job like mine wrecks the digestion early. But I couldn't get the waiter in trouble, you know."

The men changed places, and Herl found his mood of violent opposition to the social system tempered somewhat by the pleasant prospect.

"For a man without a long experience of Eyeferers, your reaction is more than justified," Crawford continued, frowning at his bowl of mush.

"But our experience had given us certain data. In the first place, when an individual goes Eyefer, it seems to be a symptom of a decreasing conviction of social responsibility. When the condition was first recognized, Eyeferers were merely placed under guardianship and their children's permits stamped to show that they were of Eyefer parentage and so were debarred from breeding with more select stock. However, Eyeferers tended to reproduce so rapidly and irresponsibly that there was danger of their becoming a parasitic burden too heavy for our normal population. That irresponsibility spread to other spheres of action as well . . . they were careless about the property of their guardians . . . if they held jobs still, they had little incentive to improve since they obviously could not manage their own moneys. Most of their children grew up to be twice as irresponsible as their parents, many of them never even applying for permits in the first place but merely sponging on their parents' guardians.

"Obviously this was no way to build a

superior race, a socially adapted race. So we accepted the obvious solution. If Eyeferers wished to withdraw from social responsibility (as they must subconsciously do or they wouldn't forget), we insist that they go the whole way. Miss Haulwell *wants* to be an Eyefer, in spite of her surface training, or she wouldn't be one."

Herl nodded, cutting off another bite of the superb steak. The argument was certainly plausible, and he pushed back the uncomfortable thought that he should be quicker to see the flaws in it.

Lifting his gaze from his plate, however, he was confronted by the outline of Crawford against the warm golden radiance of a cloud half concealing the shining body of a man of such splendid proportions and so noble and sympathetic a countenance that Herl remained a moment as if paralyzed, his knife halfway through the steak. The shining man was shaking his head slowly, regretfully, as if to indicate his disagreement with Crawford's last remark.

Then Herl lifted his knife free of the meat and pointed with it over Crawford's shoulder. "Your friend here seems to have another opinion."

Crawford turned in his chair and looked up at the glowing face. "Have I said something wrong?" he asked the figure, conversationally.

The haze swirled around the long-limbed body and the man shook his head again. "You really believe it," said the man in the tones of a great bell. "It is not wrong to tell your belief."

"Will it interfere with my doing business with Captain Hofner?" Crawford wanted to know.

"No."

"Is there anything you want me to tell him? Something I've left unsaid?"

"No."

"Then run along and let us eat in peace, there's a good chap." Crawford's words were patronizing, his tone imploring.

"Wait a minute!" Herl said sharply; but the haze seemed to be dwindling, the figure of the man evaporating before his eyes. More than anything he wanted to re-establish communication with the girl of the lobby chair.

"Want to ask him something?" queried

the Commissioner, "I think I can find you another one after we're through eating. It's fairly easy to get them to come but only hard to get rid of them if you want them to go."

"Who are they and what are they?" demanded Herl.

"We call them gods. Not because we worship them, you understand, but because they're so damned beautiful and because they are, for all practical purposes, omniscient, omnipotent, and as omnipresent as they want to be. I said 'for all practical purposes' but they don't serve any practical purposes. They're a by-product of the Eyeferers, as far as we know (and they're strangely close-mouthed about that). I'll finish my story and you'll know as much as I do."

HERL drew a deep breath. If the goddess of the lobby were even partly human, he was going to have to know her a great deal better. He visualized her rounded smiling face, its look of utter awareness, her graceful arm. Galaxy women were not like this. It must be for this he'd stayed a bachelor.

Unable to admit aloud his desire and unable to look at Crawford when thinking of her, he went back to carving the steak, half listening to the exposition which Crawford continued.

"When people go Eyefer who already have children," the commissioner went on between sipped spoonfuls of gruel, "we have to institutionalize the kids. Sterilize them too, to protect the rest of us. You may even get the idea that we're a planet of petty puritans because we care more for our race than for particular children and because the 'mortality' among scientists and artists was very high so that there are few such among us these days. However, we've taken care of the latter recently by appointing semi-guardians for the artists and scientists as soon as they announce their professions. The semi-guardians take care of all routines at their wards' expense. The architect of the Civil Center here," he waved a spoon around to indicate their environment, "is that gray-haired man over there. It justifies the change in rules."

"Why couldn't any rich man hire a 'semi-guardian' who would take care of the

formalities for him?" Herl asked.

Crawford looked shocked. "That would be grossly unfair to the rest of the population," he insisted. "There is no particular advantage to a society to perpetuate the strain of wealthy individuals; while we do need scientists and artists. But to get back to the story . . . shortly after the sterilization program began, a noted psychologist went Eyefer and managed to get himself assigned by placement to the head of one of the children's asylums. He worked with the Eyefer children there and somehow the gods are the result. They have perfect recall, perfect bodies, telepathy, intuitive perception of the nature of matter, teleportation, and some precognition. Occasionally even today, a child disappears from one of the asylums and we have a new god or goddess. And there you are."

"Are they what Commissioner Guildris was talking about? The Galaxy will really be excited," Herl said eagerly.

"Heavens, no!" Crawford laughed heartily. "They wouldn't be any more use to you than they are to us. Their bodies are changed in some way so that they are nearly pure energy."

Herl had a tight sensation of loss, of incipient grief.

"They don't eat, they don't need clothes, they don't even reproduce. As far as we can discover, they have no motivations at all except that they seem to like to watch people doing things . . . you could hardly call it curiosity. So . . . since they have no motivations there's no way to get them to cooperate with society; they can't be bribed or threatened, paid or deprived. And yet they'd beat any calculator made if we just had some means of getting them to stay around while we put the problems. They answer any questions you can ask correctly; but there's no way we know of to get them to come around when we have the questions. Oh, you can go out and pretend to do some crazy thing when you have a problem with all the factors in your head. Maybe one of them will turn up and you can ask the question before he reads your mind and fades away . . . and maybe you can't. So we call them gods and forget about them."

Calculators indeed, was Herl's inner reaction, as he tried to recapture the sensation



of being completely understood which he had felt upstairs in the lobby. She had to be a woman, not a supercalculator. "But they're so beautiful, so perfect. There must be a reason for them," he insisted.

"That's the worst thing about them," admitted Crawford. "They make ordinary people look very drab and uninspired. The Eyeferers actually have several cults which worship them; and I suppose that's a good thing. Keeps the Eyeferers out of trouble. I never heard that they did anything for their worshippers, though."

Herl thought, "We'll see about that. I think I know what to ask, next time I get the chance." Alone he added, "Don't go out of your way to get one for me to question . . . but if one turns up, I am curious about some things."

"I see you're about through," noticed the commissioner. "Let's get back up and see if your papers have come."

#### IV

NOT only had Herl's permits come when they returned to the office, but so had an officer from Eyefer Placement who wanted to talk about Agnes Haulwell and a number of other cases. Herl had no difficulty in persuading the commissioner to let him go alone to get his listings and films, when he assured Crawford that the latter's presence was not essential to the trip.

Crawford called for his cabter to take Herl out to the ship; and Herl started back for the elevator, stuffing his assorted cards and permit slips in various pockets about his person.

He scrutinized the lobby for centers of golden light as he passed, but there were no gods or goddesses to be seen there. There were none on the nearly empty elevator going down. There were none on his side of the walkway at the bottom, though he thought he glimpsed the glow far away on the other side just before his cab drew up beside him.

The driver was the same sulky young fellow who had brought him in. Herl settled back for a silent ride to the port, looked intently out the window at the large warehouses, small shops, and low compact residences as they headed for open country

where the cab could take off. The air seemed a little fresher as well as much colder. There were few pedestrians to be seen on the chilly streets and those few seemed to be in a great hurry . . . whether merely because of the cold or because the demands of life were so numerous, Herl could not tell. He wasn't even sure this might not be a time of eating or sleeping for many of the population. He turned his head to his companion.

"What's the daily schedule here?" he asked. "I mean, what hours do stores and offices and families keep?"

"Stores and offices are open all day. Families have two ups: a day and a night up, depends on their jobs and such whether it's morning and first night or afternoon and second half night."

"What do they do in their night ups?"

"Kids go to school same as day. Rest of us have night jobs . . . mostly mining and factory work. My sister and I work in a viscose mill nights."

The cabter had arrived at a broad hardtop landing area. The driver turned in, raised the copter vanes and took off. Herl watched the bleak countryside drop away below. The air had the piercing dampness of coming snow.

It occurred to Herl suddenly that the driver had volunteered some personal information . . . maybe he could get more.

"What's your name," he asked interestedly, turning to face the driver.

"Bill Haulwell."

"Oh, any relation to Agnes Haulwell?" Herl felt a little apprehensive.

"Brother."

Herl let the conversation drop right there. He'd have to fish for information roundabout. He watched miles of fields and pasture roll behind, noticed an isolated house, used that.

"Lonely sort of place to live," he pointed downward. "Don't suppose your people assign Eyeferers to live out so far."

"Some do. What's it to them where they live?"

"Does it make any difference to a man's relatives when he goes Eyefer, other than his wife and children, I mean? Crawford told me some but not all about them," Herl added.

"Difference? They might as well have

gone Eyefer themselves. They usually give a man's wife some heavy routine job no matter what she's been trained for. Say it's to keep her busy and take the mental strain off while she readjusts. Other relatives generally get the same. If they're close relatives they're suspected of being on the verge of Eyefer, since they're from the same stock; so all their permits come due within a month after. That's one reason I work so blamed hard on this job. . . . Aggie's job means so much to her. She wants to get married, too; and she'd have a deuce of a lot of trouble with that if anything happened to me."

This long speech made Herl most uncomfortable. It wasn't any of his business to tell Bill that Aggie had gone Eyefer only an hour since. But maybe it would ease Bill's strain. If Bill was going to lose his job when he got back to town anyway, it wouldn't make any difference if he knew it now. Might even give him a chance to wrestle it out inside himself.

"Bill," he began as if it were to be another question.

"Yeah?"

"Miss Haulwell went Eyefer an hour ago. Commissioner Crawford told me."

Bill Haulwell's face went whiter than it was by nature. "You're kidding. And that's not the kind of joke I like," he said threateningly.

"It's no joke, I'm afraid."

Bill scanned Herl's face, saw it grave, sympathetic. He then opened the door on his own side of the cabter and stepped out into the sky.

HERL found himself sliding over to the driver's seat, reaching for the loosely swinging door, peering down and out. Bill was a mere dwindling spot below. Herl slammed the door shut by reflex action; then sat numbly nauseated. The cab flew on evenly.

Herl took a couple of very deep breaths to subdue the nausea and looked ahead to where the outline of the port tower was sharpening on the horizon. Cautiously he tried the controls of the cabter . . . up . . . down . . . right . . . left. He could manage it, he thought dully. He could find no lever, no button, no pedal with which to reduce or increase the forward speed, however. The

brake pedal for surface control evoked no response in the air. The tower came nearer and the image of the dwindling, falling blob that had been Bill Haulwell faded from Herl's mind as he sought frantically for the mechanism to cut his speed for landing.

The tower rushed toward the cab . . . and past. Herl set the cab into a tight circle a little smaller than the circumference of the landing area. Someone would notice him, someone would either signal him or, if the power were broadcast, let him down slowly . . . he hoped. If the cab used its own fuel, that would have to run out with time. He circled and circled, counterclockwise.

There seemed to be no diminution of speed so he began to spiral down toward the ground. If he could hold the circle a few feet above the ground, someone might at least come out and shout instructions.

There was no sign from the tower that his approach had been noticed. He circled the *Krylla* several times, then circled the tower. The place seemed deserted in the growing twilight. He considered flying close to the ground and jumping out but rejected that thought as he remembered the towerman's remark about the pitting of the cinder surface . . . and remembered the paved runway at the edge of the field from which the cabter had taken off on his trip to the city.

He headed for the runway in the direction from which he had originally taken off, coming down to let the wheels skim the smooth pavement. The cabter gathered speed rapidly as the end of the runway flung itself toward him. He raised the machine into the air missing the rough ground at the end of the way by scant feet.

Herl smiled grimly. Apparently power was somehow beamed at the runway. He circled over the weedy pasture-like space and a copse of small trees and headed back to the runway. Perhaps the power would be cut if one approached from this end. Again he lowered the cab till the wheels seemed but inches above the pavement . . . and sure enough, the speed decreased. Slower and more slowly he went; but the far end of the runway approached all too rapidly. He tried to rise again, but the response of the cab was sluggish now. By lightning judgment, Herl knew that only a jump would save him from crashing with the cab among the weeds.

Those weeds swept toward him as he opened the door and rolled out, relaxing to meet the pavement sliding past.

There was no tearing bruising impact, no sound of the cab's crash. Herl opened his eyes suddenly to see, meaninglessly before him, the control panel of his own *Krylla*. He was sitting in his own pneumatic control chair.

A moment of dull wonder was replaced by a deep shuddering from shoulders to hips and a feeling that his legs and arms had turned to dough. His eyes regarded the shadow across the control panel without trying to comprehend it; but the golden light reflected on both sides of the shadow meant something. He turned to see the source . . . and it was the goddess of the lobby.

She smiled reassuringly, and the smile seemed to flow through his veins and tingle along his nerves, pushing the numbness out and away. He was alive and eager and yet utterly peaceful for the duration of her smile. But as the corners of her mouth fell into a graver repose, his thoughts sped back through the moment of expected impact . . . through the frantic struggle with the cabter . . . through the moment of Haulwell's step from the door.

"Bill Haulwell," Herl mumbled, "he . . . he's . . ."

"He's in his cab halfway back to the city to report to Eyefer Placement." The matter-of-fact words were sung in the triumphant cadence of the close of a vast chorale, rich and full.

"You saved him . . . and me?" Herl asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Clear recitative explained, "He had not earned his death; he did not wish to die. No more had you."

Herl thought this over for a moment. Did no one die here till he was ready? Were the gods personal guardians? Was the presence of human life one of their conditions of being, one of their motivations? He started to speak, then hesitated as he remembered his conclusion that there were special ways of phrasing special questions for such beings as these. His mind tried in vain to block the consciousness of fear that she would leave him with his questions unasked . . . and

simply that she would leave him.

But the cloud still swirled and glowed with a million pinpoints of deep yellow incandescence. A sodium halo, Herl thought irrelevantly.

"Yes," she smiled again from her seat above the edge of the paper-cluttered desk. "It's like sodium. And we are not guardians. We do not care whether men live or die but we do . . . enjoy . . . their being glad about living or dying. I will not leave you till you are sorry." She stood and came near his chair.

Herl could not see that she walked in the air . . . she was just nearer. He rose and put out his hands as if to take hers to assure himself that she would stay, but where his hands entered the cloud they disappeared and felt nothing. He withdrew his offered embrace and his hands reappeared.

"Sorry for what?" asked Herl's voice; and Herl's heart quickened and his breathing forced, as he grew afraid to lose her and wild to keep her with him.

"Just sorry."

REGRET was like a knife stab. He must lose her: a man couldn't go around rejoicing forever. Anger succeeded regret, and he accused her bitterly, "So that's why you do nothing for the poor Eyeferers! Because they're sorry to be that way! When you could save the poor creatures even by picking them out of the air, it offends your sensibilities to save them from a little red tape. Is that kind or just?"

His voice sneered 'kind' and 'just' as his mind pictured 'sympathetic' and 'the best that men ought to receive.' He was angry for himself, for the Eyeferers. His anger grew with the hurt to include all humanity betrayed by heartless beauty.

But a flood of intense living greenness washed through the control room, blotting out the walls and lapping against Herl's red tunic above the hip pockets, as if a strange sea rose about him to quench his anger.

He repeated his last words, vaguely, enthralled by the green waves, "Is that kind or just?"

The green waves changed to living blue and he heard her voice like a distant bell. "No."

Herl had a sensation as if the blueness

washed completely through him with a tingling coolness. Suddenly the room cleared and she was sitting on the edge of the table still. In Herl's mind lay fresh and clear the method he had planned hours . . . or was it minutes . . . earlier for communicating with this glowing girl-thing, exact, detailed, perfect questions for a perfect mind. His overwhelming intent to embrace her was put neatly to one side as on a shelf; his anger was as if it had never been.

"Do you have a name?" he looked coolly at her as if helping her fill out a questionnaire.

"Yes."

"What is it please?" he asked, firm, polite.

"Abigail."

Herl smothered a grin. There could be something unexotic about a goddess. "Can you offer data as well as supply data and computation on demand?" he wanted to know.

"Yes."

"Will you be good enough to do so hereafter when I ask you questions?"

"If you will indicate the limitations you wish on additional data," she replied gravely.

"Do you mean that there is so great a correlation between all extant data that you would continue offering indefinitely if you were not arbitrarily limited?" he asked curiously, feeling an interior warmth of success. His method of communication was working indeed. Be explicit, he told himself.

"Yes."

Herl sneaked a mental look at his urge to kiss her. As when eating Crawford's steak, he found that he could forgive and forget a great deal when confronted with considerable pleasure in prospect.

He continued. "Will you decide and tell me what questions I ought to ask and what actions I ought to take and what limitations I should set on the data you have to offer?" Now he would have communication by the roots.

"No."

"Are you capable of doing so, Abigail?" A crucial question, asked almost in a whisper.

"No."

Grief more bitter than anger ran through

his veins like corrosive poison. This was the wrong answer. She must be a machine-thing after all, he concluded . . . limited, arbitrary, unhuman, incapable of loving him or being concerned for his welfare, incapable of sorting out good from bad or valuable from expedient.

He withdrew his eyes from her brightness and from her delicate features and from her rounded limbs and put his head in his hands. An agonized sigh burst from him. No human woman could keep from giving him good advice, particularly if she knew all the answers . . . his mother never had avoided the responsibilities of knowledge. So she could have nothing human about her. She was just a thing.

"No . . . no . . . no," her music faded slowly away; and Herl looked up to catch the faintest after-image of the brilliance that had centered on the table. That, too, was gone in an instant; and no presence or effects of a presence other than his own was visible before him.

He sat motionless in his supporting chair, his eyes staring unseeing at brown table and black film lockers and at the long blue chart roll hung behind the table and at the calculator keys in their neat meaningless ranks. In her absence, he felt compressed between the backward thrust of disillusion and emptiness and the forward pull of a tearing desire to be with her wherever she was. He would have done anything she wanted, gone anywhere, been anything . . . and there was nothing she wanted of him. He remained slumped, drained of purpose. Drained, he reflected, by a shiny machine more bound than he to commands and limitations. At any rate he did have a few minor purposes of his own.

V

HE GOT up stiffly and reached for the locker handles, squeezed the metal, felt the latches withdraw, swung the doors open. Mechanically he took down the reels of film and wire from their pegs and laid them in squat pillars on the table top. Another locker yielded two black rectangular carrying cases with handles. Herl loaded the reels carefully into one case, checked the power pack in the base of the other case

with leads to a test-board in one drawer of the table. Lifting both heavy cases, he started for the door.

The slightest clue of remembrance tingling in his mind, and he returned to his chair and phoned the control tower.

"Class M ship *Krylla* on the field calling control tower," he bit off the words tensely.

"Control tower to *Krylla*; come in *Krylla*." The voice was high-pitched and boyish, obviously not Saem Berry.

"Did you see what became of the cabter that landed me here," Herl referred to the chronometer on his instrument panel, "ten minutes ago?"

"Cabter KZ-351 returned to Delight City."

"Can you call me another cabter to take me to the city?" At any rate, Herl thought, she really was powerful to be able to return an empty cabter. He had an amusing mental image of Abigail stretching an extra shining arm through the miles of air between the *Krylla* and where a shining hand supported the waiting and unconscious Bill Haulwell. He might learn some tricks from her yet.

All he had to do was find out why she had rescued him and Bill. After all, if she had no knowledge of valid selection of purposes, she must be controlled by some command, some exterior compulsion, like the familiar robots of earth, so carefully constructed with arbitrary functions and prohibitions built in. Time to compute on that later. The thought was rapid, finished before the answer came from the tower.

"I'll have to see your hired vehicle permit, if you have one." The thin voice was sarcastic and a bit suspicious.

"I'll come right to the tower with it. Over."

Grasping a case in each hand he left the ship and headed for the tower entrance. Almost there, the hum of an incoming copter made him turn and look at the runway. The copter landed neatly and, even from that distance, Herl could recognize the fur-coated figure of Commissioner Crawford getting out.

The Commissioner raised an arm and hailed Captain Hofner. "Hey!"

"Hey, yourself," Herl turned from the tower and strode toward the copter. "Did

you come for me?"

"Sure," yelled the Commissioner. Turning to look up and wave at the tower, he called, "It's all right, Alco. This is my guest." He halted and waited for Herl to come up with him.

"Bill phoned me," began Crawford apologetically, "that he'd had the word about Agnes and dashed back to straighten out the driving job so someone else could take over." The two men walked side by side to the copter. "That was a very decent thing for him to do, even if it did leave you stranded out here . . . so I came out for you. Find everything?"

"Oh I found everything, all right," Herl grinned wryly. "Did Bill tell you about Abigail?"

"Abigail?" asked Crawford. "I don't seem to remember the name."

"She saved me from getting hurt during the landing. A goddess. Bill was probably embarrassed to mention it. It was my own stupid fault."

Herl went around the copter to get in.

Crawford edged in behind the controls. "Bill probably wanted you to keep out of trouble. He knows that we are apt to look with considerable suspicion on people who have to be saved from their own foolish mistakes by superhuman agencies. That doesn't apply to you, of course, unless you're planning to settle and raise kids here." The 'perish-the-thought' tone was obvious.

"Frankly, as an outsider," Herl said, "it seems to me that these gods and goddesses could be a very useful mechanism. I didn't mind missing a bad fall at all."

"And frankly, as a local citizen and an ordinary one at that, I think you were very lucky. You might even say that down underneath I'm just a bit jealous." The copter slid through the upper air. "I sometimes dream of having a chance to rescue some female not a tenth as luscious as a goddess."

HERL was surprised to hear the Commissioner snigger at his own remark. Surprised but not disgusted. Females less perfect than goddesses seemed to call for sniggers.

"Goddesses are only goddesses, but women are women," Herl commented dryly.

"Oh! You found that out already, did

you?" Crawford looked admiringly at his companion. "You're a quick worker."

Hard bitterness surged through Herl. "I found out a lot of things. They're nothing, absolutely nothing but mechanism. I wonder you people haven't learned to use them in place of copters and television. They're probably even capable of sorting your population in infancy so you wouldn't have to go to the trouble of inventing a dozen new kinds of red tape a day which must annoy your normal citizens even while it screens the adults."

"No . . . no . . . no . . ." Crawford's descending cadence was oddly reminiscent of some other falling cadence of no's. "You've got both the gods and us all wrong, Captain Hofner. I don't know what you think you found out from this Abigail, but you must have misinterpreted it somewhere."

"Indeed?"

"Oh yes indeed. Mechanisms are made . . . made for somebody's use. Our best minds have never been able to find any use for gods. We can even use natural phenomena like rain and heat and wind and gravity and such because those things are governed by observable natural laws . . . but the gods? No. Absolutely random in appearance; absolutely unpredictable in action. Whatever they are, it's not machines. Although," he added curiously, "I shall be most interested to learn how and why you think we could use them."

"Maybe I should sell you the secret. Selling is my business," suggested Herl.

"The commissioners will be most willing to buy . . . if you have anything to sell," Crawford replied smoothly.

"You could use that childhood or prenatal screening, couldn't you?"

"Yes and no," answered Crawford. "That's another mistaken idea you have about us. What you think of as red tape invented purely for screening purposes is not so at all. It's an integral part of civilized life and social responsibility. We'd all be pleased to spare a portion of our children the strains of such a life if we could, but we have no intention of reverting to savagery ourselves just to avoid filling out a few miserable blanks at a few stated times."

"Oh, you like it?" Herl asked facetiously.

"We like having cars and living in houses

and driving in comparative safety and eating enough and not having people we've cheated or oppressed or maimed in unnecessary accidents whining around on our doorsteps making us feel guilty and miserable. We even like having occasional strangers like you around so we can tell them all about it and keep the beauties of civilization clear before our eyes, so to speak."

"You win," Herl laughed. "I don't know whether there's a galactic destiny ahead of your people, but as long as you're enjoying it so much, that hardly matters."

"I hoped you'd see it that way," the Commissioner said genially. "And as for the destiny, that'll take care of itself. Did you have quite a talk with the goddess?" he added curiously.

"Quite a talk, but brief. I've had some training in cybernetics . . . that's how I was able to ask the right questions to find out that she was a machine."

Crawford smiled to himself. "Then," he said slyly, "our experts must have asked the right questions to find out that she wasn't."

Herl bit his tongue. "Maybe," he admitted. There was no object in telling Crawford all about his method or his discoveries, or he'd have nothing to sell. Not that he'd make the profit from such a sale but somebody in coordination would appreciate his cleverness in selling a planet something it already had and still being able to peddle the idea to somebody else. If he were really clever, he could take a few gods on with him to the places where they could do the most good. He certainly would enjoy looking at Abigail, for instance, for a few months before he unloaded her on a planet less fortunate than Delight. And, if he were sorry to leave her behind, she'd stay there the more gladly. If she wouldn't tell him what to do, obviously she would have to do what he told her.

THE gray air of the planet seemed to be thickening as they landed and drove back toward the Civil Building. A few more heavy-coated pedestrians were hastening along the walks, and a solid stream of small, lighted vehicles poured along the street in the opposite direction. As Crawford's slowed automatically for an intersection, Herl noticed flakes of snow in the air.



"Is this early spring or late fall?" he asked without enthusiasm.

"This is the way it always is at this altitude," Crawford replied, surprised. "I've read about seasons, of course, but we don't have them here. Our foodstuff is mostly grown further south. Around here and to the north is mostly grazing and pelt land on the surface above the mines."

At this moment the vehicle pulled to a stop in the middle of a residential block; and Crawford growled, "What the . . . ?"

Herl noticed that the opposing traffic had also halted. Then the air was split with the deafeningly raucous hooting of some great signal horn.

"Power's off! Emergency warning," Crawford shouted in Herl's ear. "Sit tight and see what happens!" He gestured to the line of opposing traffic from which passengers were popping out to run confusedly to the sidewalk. "They know better than that," he fumed.

Herl looked at the crowd gathering on his side of the carpter, then suddenly beyond it to the nearest house. Smoke was pouring out of two of the front windows. Some of the people from the vehicles were running toward the house, while the front door was flung open and two men and a woman came running out. Herl grabbed Crawford's arm. "Fire!" he yelled.

Crawford leaned across Herl to look. "Can't be serious," he bellowed. "Those places are practically fireproof. Inspected every two months."

Then he sounded puzzled and alarmed. "Where the devil are those three going?" and he pointed to the people who had run from the house and who were still running fleetly along the edges of lawns in the direction faced by Crawford's carpter.

Herl opened the door and leaned out to watch. People were coming out of houses further down the street, a few at a time, to follow or precede the first three in the direction of the heart of the city.

Cries of "Fire!" could be heard on down the street. Flames showed through the windows of other houses. The people who had got to the sidewalks from their abandoned vehicles were moving hesitantly toward the houses, apparently confused by the flight of those within.

A man appeared in the doorway of the house from which the first three had come. "Hey!" he shouted at those stragglers nearest him, "some of you come in here and help me put out the fire!" Several men ran into the house behind him.

A few more single individuals ran by in the direction of the business district. Herl turned to his companion.

"It looks as though those first three set the fire and ran off," he shouted, puzzled. "What's up?"

Crawford put his hand on the door and shook his head. "Don't know, but I recognized one of those fellows who just passed us. Eyefer named Hanston. Used to be a clerk of mine. I'm going on down the line and see what's doing."

"Not without me," Herl stated. "I can't operate one of these things," he waved his hand at the carpter, "and you may need help." Commissioner Crawford hardly looked in condition for a long run.

"What about your things? Don't you want to keep an eye on them?"

"They'll be all right," Herl said flatly, knowing that he should never let them out of his sight outside his own ship . . . that they would be impossible to replace without returning to Earth.

The older man slid out of his seat and jogged off down the middle of the street till the younger caught up with him. Together they ran toward the city.

**B**ETWEEN the lined-up cars they could see fires in many of the houses they passed, and groups of people standing helplessly on sidewalks and lawns. None of the houses appeared to be actually on fire, but window draperies or something near the windows were blazing merrily. Through some casements, people could be seen aiming fire extinguishers at the flames or throwing water on them.

Crawford lumbered along rather slowly. Herl matched his pace. A young man running rapidly passed them from behind.

"Going to the Civil Building to see the fun?" he panted out as he passed.

"Sure," returned Herl, speeding up a little. "What's it all about?"

The young man looked back at Herl, seeming to notice the red tunic and drum

cap for the first time. "If you don't know . . ." he gasped out, "you'd better stay back. It's the Eyefer Plan." He sprinted on and Herl turned back to wait for the Commissioner.

"It's something about the Eyefers," he told the trotting man as he fell into step beside him. "He said he was going to the Civil Building to see the fun, and he called it 'the Eyefer Plan.'"

"Can't imagine what . . . that . . . is," Crawford blurted out. "Keep going."

They passed dark shops and closed warehouses. The lines of cars were solid here and a tide of hurrying pedestrians on the sidewalks swept toward town. Runners threaded among them, men in shabby clothes, forlorn looking women pushing and stumbling ahead a little faster than the general pace. The center of the street where Herl and Crawford jogged on between the cars was almost deserted.

Crawford grasped Herl's sleeve and pulled him to a stop. "Look there!"

Herl looked where he pointed and saw the crowd milling about the door of a shop. A man and a woman stood in the doorway tossing fur coats out into the mob. Here and there a runner paused, grabbed up a coat where it fell on or near a pedestrian, and ran on.

Crawford climbed over the bumpers of a couple of cars and got to the sidewalk. Herl followed and joined him at the shop doorway in time to hear the Commissioner say, "See here, my man, those coats are not yours to give away. You're an Eyefer and you have no business at all here. Now get on home."

He grabbed the man's elbow to start him on his way . . . and recognized him. "Good grief! Bill Haulwell!"

The woman in the doorway was Agnes. She laughed boisterously. "Get along home yourself, old man. We want coats so we take coats. Here, have one."

She threw a heavy fur coat over Crawford's head and as he tried to fight clear of its folds, Bill held it down like a bag and hoisted the small man along toward the edge of the crowd.

Herl caught him as he fell and pulled off the coat. Crawford threw it angrily on the ground. "You can't get away with this," he

shouted. "The police will be here in a minute."

This time it was Bill who laughed. "They're all too busy at the Civil Building to bother with coats." Agnes threw out a couple more coats which had been handed to her by somebody within the shop.

"Besides, they already have coats," she added.

"We'd better get out of this," Herl told Crawford, starting back across the cars.

"Yes," agreed the latter as he clambered up and over. "Better see what's happening downtown. Sounds drastic."

The pair ran on faster now. From ahead grew a trembling roar which swelled to a steady gentle thundering above which the alarm yapped and blatted. A ruddy glow silhouetted the bodies of the cars they were passing, and the center of the street was filling with runners. A few hundred yards brought them to where Herl could see the shape of the Civil Building and recognize the glow as fire spurring from the windows of the two top storeys.

They stopped on the outskirts of an immense crowd circling the building. Great streams of water shot aloft from immense hoses; but the streams wobbled and wavered in a hundred directions as the nozzles shifted everywhere but at the building itself. Herl and Crawford were drenched twice before they could get close enough to see that the hoses were being battled for by gangs of Eyefers against the sturdy teams of firemen. The shouting and roar of the fire were so deafening that Herl and the Commissioner were well into the crowd before the words were comprehensible.

"Let 'em burn! Let the records burn! Let 'em burn up!"

"The records!" Crawford gave out a kind of spluttering screech that made Herl turn in astonishment. "The records! My God! There won't be any laws . . . any Eyefers . . . any civilization if we lose the records!"

Herl thought the little man was going to faint, he trembled so violently. Then, suddenly, Crawford took a great gulping breath, wrenched himself from Herl's supporting grasp and, pushing his way through the massed bodies, made for the cordon keeping the onlookers out of the danger zone. Herl pressed after him but reached the

front line only in time to see Crawford jumping sidewise fifty feet ahead to elude a fireman and dashing for the gaping mouth of the vehicle tunnel through the building. Herl followed on the double, pointing ahead at the disappearing figure of the Commissioner without trying to yell out his destination to the hindering firemen.

A greater shout went up as a piece of the stone cornice fell from the top of the building to the pavement below with the crash of nearby blasting. Severed sections of hose blatted forth powerful torrents that swept firemen and mob along the street into a line of cars. Herl dodged among writhing pythons of hose toward the tunnel. Another surging shout heralded another cataclysmic deed of fire; and Herl looked up to see a piece of wall about twenty feet high falling slowly away from the building above him.

He closed his eyes and dashed forward. He felt the tremendous jar of the smashing stone force him to his knees, but no sound . . . in fact all sound had faded to utter stillness.

"Struck deaf," he thought wonderingly and opened his eyes to find himself kneeling before the table in the silence of the *Krylla*. The bright warmth of Abigail shone before him where she sat several inches above the table top.

"Abigail," he shouted, scrambling to his feet. His voice rang through the small cabin, and he lowered it to suit his surroundings. "Why did you bring me here?"

"You were in danger," she replied pleasantly.

"So is Crawford. I've got to help him. Take me back!" he commanded.

"He's all right. No one will be hurt tonight who doesn't want to be hurt." Her voice was sweetly matter of fact.

"I don't believe it. The Eyefers have run wild! Crawford ran right into the building. He'll be killed. Take me back!" He pounded the table with his fist.

## VI

HE WAS back. The roar of the crowd and the fire and the hideous 'poot-poot-poot' of the alarm filled his consciousness. He was stumbling forward into the pitchy blackness of the tunnel under the

building. He could see a man a hundred feet ahead scrambling up to the walkway, illumined only by the glare from the tunnel mouth. Suddenly brightness bloomed beside the man and the golden form of a god cradled the man's body like a child, rose four or five feet into the air, and faded abruptly into nothingness. The tunnel was dark and empty ahead.

Herl turned and stroke back toward the mouth of the tunnel. Just under the sheltering edge he paused to look out at the mob and to judge whether another part of the building were about to fall.

The throng was now a series of rings of luridly red wild-faced beings linked together at the elbows, swaying this way and that, howling in unison, "Burn the records! No more Eyefers! Burn the records! No more Eyefers!"

Hovering over the heads of the chanters, Herl could see at least half a dozen great yellow lights which he took to be gods watching the doings.

"Some sense of humor," he said to himself, as he leaned out of the shelter to look up.

The searing redness of the fire faded before his eyes to the cooler radiance of Abigail; and he was looking up at her where she hung near the ceiling of the *Krylla's* cabin.

"They don't think it's funny at all," she replied reproachfully, as if he had addressed his last remark to her. "They are simply preventing accidents. Being trampled to death is not really a joke." This in a minor cadence of muted violins.

"But don't the Eyefers intend death and destruction to the non-Eyefers? That fire is no joke, either."

"No one will be hurt, as I told you. The Eyefer Plan calls only for the destruction of the records. They burned all the individual permits they could find before they left the houses. Now they burn the files. Nobody could tell an Eyefer from anybody else without the papers; and papers burn." She sounded quite pleased.

"Are you gods in on this?" Herl sat frustatedly on the edge of the desk. "Why didn't you just vanish the papers years ago?"

"We only help when people are sure they know what they want to do. The Eyefers

had to be ready. After that they will do as they please and as they can and must."

"But you are involved in this revolt somehow," he frowned, "and why should this uprising come just when I arrive?"

"You are a catalyst," she giggled, a peal of tiny sleighbells, and drifted down toward the pilot chair. "And we are just preventing the Eyefers from being sorry for their plan as we prevented the civies from being sorry for theirs. The civies made a mistake and we are saving them from it." She laughed again. "They frown at people who are saved from their mistakes by 'supernatural agencies' so the Eyefers will save them."

Hert was ready to ask how he was a catalyst, but the words 'supernatural agencies' reminded him of Crawford and his own cases resting on the stalled carpter.

"My cases," he said. "I've got to get them back here. Take me back again, Abby." His thought continued that he would get a chance to see more of the fight, that had been brewing for decades.

"I'll bring them to you," she assented, resting lightly in the chair. "This isn't your squabble."

"But you said I was involved—as a catalyst at least."

"The reaction is self-sustaining now."

"But you don't know where the carpter is," he objected hopefully.

"You do . . . so I do." The cases were on the table in front of him.

"What am I supposed to do now? Wait till Crawford calls to say all deals are off?" Hert remarked irritated. Who did the girl think she was, refusing like an over-solicitous mother to let him get back to the riot?

"Yes. Mr. Crawford won't be able to call you till the power is restored about noon tomorrow. And it will be months before he knows what he wants to order. What you do is your own will, of course. I can't penetrate that unless you can. I'm going back to the fire to help there. I'll see you again unless you decide to blast off before I come back."

Hert grabbed for her bare shoulders where they shone a mere yard in front of him. "You're not going back without me!" he stormed but she was quite gone before the sentence was complete, leaving him in the utter darkness of an unilluminated cabin.

He found the back of the chair, seated

himself, touched the light switch. He was indeed alone in the cabin. The heavy cases sat smug on the motionless table. He felt numb, aware only of an unwillingness to move and of the futility of trying to get back to the city if he was only to find himself back in the *Krylla* if he did. "Damned interfering female," he muttered disgustedly, "I'll show her!" All he had to do, she'd said, was blast off. Why not?

He switched on the phone, still set for the control tower.

"Class M ship *Krylla* on the field, calling control tower," he articulated crisply.

There was no response.

"Class M Ship," he repeated impatiently, "calling control tower. Come in tower!"

There was no carrier hum from his receiver. The thing seemed dead. He activated the viewscreen above the instrument panel and adjusted the angle for a full sight of the tower.

The tower was there, all right, a black hulk against the slightly luminous night sky, unlighted, solid, a mere chunk of construction.

"Hanh! Power's off, of course," Hert said aloud. Well, that meant nobody else would try to land here, so takeoff should be safe if he wanted to do his own manipulating out of the atmosphere.

But he'd have to leave some sort of message for Crawford, he realized. He swivelled the chair and regarded the cases of film and wire blankly. His job was coordination, not dashing off on a mad into space. He calculated quickly . . . twenty-two, twenty-three hours till daylight; then maybe another ten hours or so till the power was restored and he could talk to Crawford . . . if Crawford would talk to him . . . if Crawford still had any power to negotiate extra-planetary purchases. And if Crawford didn't, he, Hert, would have to wait around till somebody did have the authority. Wait, wait, wait!

Every muscle in Hert's body seemed taut to the breaking point. He couldn't just sit and wait thirty-two hours for the privilege of waiting till the Eyefers formed a government and got ready to bargain! He jumped hopefully for an instant at the thought of walking the eighty miles to town. He could probably do that in thirty-two hours. Only to have that woman catch up to him when

he was halfway there and plump him back in this ship.

A METALLIC clanging against the skin of the ship brought him to his feet. He moved to the inner lock door and opened it slowly, noiselessly. Maybe the Eyeferers had got control of the tower already!

Bang! Bang! the hammering continued. Not power hammering, more like knocking.

Herl let the outer lock open a fraction of an inch toward him. The voice from outside filled the lock with its bellow. "Hey! Anybody in here? Hey, Captain."

It was the tower man of the first long wait.

"What d'you want?" Herl asked suspiciously, shoulder against the lock door.

"It's Saem Berry. I need help. Power's off, Joe Alco's gone, twenty-five hours mail is due in anytime. May try to land right on top of us! You got a radio!"

"Sure," Herl's suspicions faded. "Come in." He opened the lock wide and gave the heavy man a hand up. "Want me to try to contact the mail, huh?"

"Yeah. But you better let me talk to them." The towerman followed Herl to the chair, adding the necessary instructions for calling the mail ship.

Herl sat down and got to work.

Within five minutes the ship had been re-routed back to its last port of call and Herl and Saem were relaxing over cups of haffy Herl had opened in the galley. Saem tipped back in the pilot chair to reflect on the state of things in the city, which Herl had given him in bits and pieces as he relayed it to the oncoming mail ship.

"Well, Captain, I might as well get back to the tower and wait it out unless you're willing to have me here for company, that is. There's no other ship due till about morning."

"I'd be glad to have you stay," Herl said hesitantly, "but I haven't decided just what to do myself. I don't suppose Crawford and the commissioners will be in any position to trade now; and I'm not too hopeful about trying to deal with an irresponsible gang like those Eyeferers. I could probably get back this way in, say, a couple of years when things have settled down and they know what they need." His voice was nonchalant,

but with an undercurrent of eagerness for an excuse to be gone.

"I wouldn't be in any hurry, son," Saem assured him, taking a deep swig of haffy. "I don't think the Eyeferers will try to run things at all. Not only out of the habit, but they don't want to. They'd have everything to lose by not using the present trade and power set-ups. All they want is jobs and justice."

"And no questions asked?" Herl frowned. "You sound as if you approved of this revolt."

"Why not?" Saem demanded truculently. "I had a kid all trained to take over the second day shift . . . best radioman I ever had. When his mother went Eyefer they jerked him out of here to a bobbin job in the mills so fast I had to work twenty-two hours a day for a month before I got a replacement. I approve of anything that'll put a stop to such stupidity."

Herl squirmed, pursed his lips. "You think I'd better stay, then?"

"Well, why not wait for that goddess to come back? She'll have a report on what's going on and you can make up your mind then. She can give you better advice than I could." The shock-headed Saem set his empty cup down on the desk with a smack. "Got another of those?" he gestured at the cup.

"Blast the haffy, man! This calls for something better than that." Herl jumped down from the table. "I've got a bottle of bonded thiska for medicinal purposes. That'll shorten the wait!" He bounded past Saem through the galley door.

The towerman looked after him bewildered, watched him reach into a locker and bring out the plastic flask, saw him take down two small plastic beakers and come back past the doorway to perch jubilantly on the desk again holding out the flask invitingly. Saem looked at him questioningly.

"She said she wouldn't leave us as long as we're not sorry," Herl announced. "So let's get just as unsorry as this bottle will let us."

Saem approached the desk hesitantly. "What is that stuff," he asked, "something like beer?"

"Something like beer, the man says!" chuckled Herl. "Yes, boy, something like

beer. Here." He poured out a beaker full of amber thiska and handed it to Saem. "One for me." He poured out another beaker full. "To not being sorry," he raised his beaker and drained it.

Saem tasted his, then gulped also. "Whooeee! Something like beer, the man says," he echoed and passed back his beaker. "Did you offer *this* stuff to the commissioners?" he wanted to know.

"Silly old commissioners," Herl remarked archly, slopping out two more drinks. "Didn't want girlie shows . . . don't like people to get mixed up with goddesses . . . couldn't possibly appreciate bonded thiska. Didn't even offer them any." He drew a deep breath. Thiska couldn't work this fast on only one drink unless he were tired or upset. It must be thinking about Abigail that made him feel he had an antigravitor attached to his ears. Abigail!

"Here's to Abigail. May she never be sorry either!" he announced.

"Here's to Abby . . . knows all, sees all, tells 'em nothing!" Saem downed his drink and moved over to the swivel chair, sat, held out his beaker.

"Say, Saem," Herl filled the extended beaker with deliberate care, "what kind of a wife would a girl make if a man never knew where she'd be next?"

"I dunno, son. Maybe you could anchor her at home with a pair of electro-magnets." Saem laughed longer and louder than Herl expected, downed his beaker and held it out again.

Herl looked at the proffered container, narrowed his eyes and looked at Saem suspiciously. "That's about enough for you, Saem. You're beginning to get blurry."

Saem looked down at his extended arm. Sure enough, a golden haze was starting to form around the limb, a naked, rippling muscular arm. He set his beaker with exaggerated precision on the edge of the desk and slapped at the offending haze. "Get back in there," he commanded. The haze cleared, the brown shirt sleeve regained complete opacity. "Nothing wrong with me," he announced firmly. "You must be seeing things. Give me another." He held up the beaker.

Herl shook his head and poured himself another. "I need this worse than you do.

I'm the one that I . . . need Abigail not to leave me . . . myself and not you. You can get just as sorry as you like because then when she comes back she'll leave you and not me and that means she'll put you somewhere else. If I don't give you another drink, you'll be sorry and I'll have her all to myself . . . do you follow me? Hurry up, Abigail!"

A FLARE exploded brilliantly by the gallery door and it was Abigail. Her cloud of golden haze was forming into swirling tendrils which snapped into sparks at the ends.

Herl widened his eyes at the frequent revelation of thigh, of bosom.

Her voice was an angry pizzicato of steel strings. "Saem Berry! Dad! You're drunk! Get out of that matter this instant! The idea, Herl Hofner, getting Saem drunk when he was supposed to be keeping *you* out of trouble!"

Her slender arm pointed accusingly at Saem. "Out of it!" she jangled, "or I'll leave you to do all the explaining."

Herl's gaze followed her gesture and he watched, trancelike, as the clothes of the transfiguring towerman disintegrated into wreaths of shining golden smoke which clung around a superb sculptured torso and swirled to leave a benign and thoughtful face regarding him with sympathetic, almost regretful amusement.

Saem's voice was the pedal tones of a great organ improvising in a minor key. "All that alcohol wasted when I put off the flesh," he sang at Abigail. "A new sensation, and you take it from me."

"You can go back to your tower and re-materialize with all that poison inside you, as soon as you've explained us and the rebellion to Herl. He doesn't trust me very much, yet," she chimed.

Herl shook his head and looked at Abigail and back at Saem. He blinked and straightened his spine and breathed deeply; but they didn't change or go away.

Saem looked at him intently and, to Herl, the interior of the room was filled with the liquid blue of his first tete-a-tete with Abigail . . . blue and green waves of coolness washing through him and then complete clarity and sharpness of outline of every-



thing about him.

"I'll synthesize you another flask of thiska," Saem apologized, "later."

Abigail relaxed her accusatory attitude, crossed her perfect legs and sat in the air at the level of the desk. "Now tell him quickly," she requested, "so he can leave if he wants to."

"Abby took one look at you and made up her mind," Saem said matter-of-factly, "partly because she'd like to travel and partly because most of us god-boys are younger than she and not ready to materialize and settle down . . . and partly because . . . well, she can tell you that herself."

"Oh?" Herl's clarity of mind did not prevent bewilderment at this sudden revelation. He looked at Abigail who smiled seraphically back.

"But she didn't want to miss the fun of the Eyefer revolution she'd been conniving at for years, so she had to precipitate that at once and get it over with."

"I see," said Herl, "what kind of catalyst I was." And he was beginning to.

"She was being quite literal when she told you she couldn't tell you what you ought to do. Your own morals and ethics are so far inside that she couldn't get at them without your full consent or hypnosis. But of course, like any other gal, she knew perfectly what she wanted you to do; and she did it."

"Aha," said Herl, whose grasp of the idea was sudden and complete.

"We can read formulated thoughts, of course, but not basic postulates unstated . . . as long as we are composed of space, time, and energy and don't dabble in the slow stuff you call matter too much."

Herl looked at the shimmering Abigail keenly. "You mean to tell me that you can take on a matter body and give up sliding through my mind?" he demanded.

Abigail straightened her already straight posture. "If I want to," she replied coolly.

Saem chuckled in bull-fiddle tones. "If she wants a family she'll have to," he informed Herl. "The best babies are like the worst . . . they all have to be made out of matter."

Abigail's sodium haze deepened toward the neon. "Dad!"

Her father's look became affectionate. "I don't know where you'd be if Mother and I hadn't settled down long ago with faked papers by the ream and started raising little pre-goddesses."

To Herl he said, "Mother's a somatic surgeon, specializing in the reversal of sterilization operations. That's one reason why they won't be able to tell Eyefers from anybody else when the smoke clears. Oh," he added, remembering, "I forgot to ask about the little insurrection and whether you think Delightites will want to buy anything from this sears-monkey."

"You're a dear old Eyefer, Dad," Abigail laughed. "The excitement is still on, but Hanner and Treece are smoothing things down." She turned to Herl. "I hope it isn't a disappointment to you, but Delight won't need to buy anything for years. They're just about to find out that they can do anything they want to. You'll have to peddle your planets and your calculators and your dancing girls somewhere else . . . where they're really needed."

And back to Saem, "You can go see the fire for yourself now, if you like."

"I guess that's my cue," Saem stood up a foot or so above the floor, extended his glowing hand. "Take care of my little girl and drop back this way sometime soon."

Not knowing what else to do, Herl reached for the hand and saw his own vanish into the cloud, felt nothing. "Good-bye, sir," he fumbled.

He withdrew his hand and said, "But . . ."

But Saem was just not there.

Abigail laughed, sweet, musical.

Herl turned and saw her, a woman in a silky blue gown. A woman with red hair, not amber flames, a woman surrounded by a faint flowery scent, not incandescent sodium vapor. A woman standing shyly on the floor, not proudly seated on an airy throne.

He sprang down from the table and took her into his arms for a long long moment.

She drew away for an instant and laughed. "I thought I'd given up telepathy, dear, but I still seem to know just what you're thinking."

"And I know what I ought to do," he replied and did it.

# MARS IS HOME

By BRYAN BERRY

*The Peony was a poor despised one-man tug rocket, yet she confounded every great technical mind between Earth and Mars. Haunted? Jinxed? Bedeviled? Ask Professor Henderson—the Peony's last passenger.*

THE professor had one more month to live, that was all.

He sat in his apartment with his papers and books all round him in mountainous papery confusions upon the glass table, thinking hard about this solemn fact.

A month, they had told him. Four more weeks or so and then—*finis*. He pushed his fingers through gray hair. It would not be so bad if they would let him return to Mars to die. But no; space on the rockets was precious. No one could get a passport unless they were in perfect health. Anyway, he didn't have the money for the fare now; he had spent almost his last credit weeks ago when he made this trip from Mars to Earth in the hope that one of the Earth doctors would be able to cure him of his illness.

Sighing he stood up and walked across to the window. I need Mars now, he thought. I don't really need to see Martian scenes or touch the sands or the rocks with my fingers. It's just the knowledge that I'm on Mars again that I want. I don't fear death as much as the thought of dying sixty million miles away from my home; lonely death far from the mutant colony, far from the red hills and the clear pale skies and the cold biting winds of evening and the two moons and the double moonlight.

The old professor shuddered. He was going to die; he hadn't finished his investigations, his work. He was a very long way from home.

Outside the night was deep midnight blue with stars crawling like phosphorescent ants afar off. The fireworks of mail rockets exploded brilliantly from the spaceport to the west of the city. Golden rain, silver

rain and red rain making bright fountains here and there in the night as the rockets rose up, bound perhaps for Venus or Luna Colony, or perhaps for Mars.

From hidden sources within the walls of the professor's apartment soft music throbbed out, sentimental and sad, the sensitive responder picking up the sadness in the old man's thoughts and selecting music to fit the mood.

The professor stared from the window across to where his books and papers lay upon the table. "If I only had a little more time and a little more money I might find out. I might manage to complete the investigations. But my money's gone and my time, too, now," he said very quietly to himself. "Another hundred credits and I could hire a private rocket and go up to the station. Once there I might even . . ."

His words trailed off and a smile crept shyly across his old wrinkled face, looking strangely out of place among the creases and the furrows of age.

He stood for a moment thinking. Then he went quickly to the wall visor set, his smile growing broader on his face.

Jefferson would lend him the money. Would give it, even. He had helped the man long ago and now it was Jefferson's turn to help him. He dialed a number on the visor set and waited for the connection to be made. With the hundred credits or so that Jefferson would give him he'd be able to take a rocket up to the Tub and then . . .

CALLED the Tub because that was what it looked like—this space station circling slowly in the inky splendors up beyond Earth.



And up towards it, streaking, came the rocket.

The rocket braked, slowed, maneuvered, began to circle. Then a metal-jointed snake emerged from the Tub, caught it, held it firmly in its magno-grabs and drew it inside.

"Good evening," said the professor, stepping out.

"Good evening, sir. May I see your pass, please?"

"Private business, my good man. I have no pass."

The man shook his head. "Then I'm afraid I shall have to keep you here until I find out . . ."

"Keep me here? Keep me here?" The professor shook a long finger violently. "You'll do nothing of the sort. Go tell the commander that Professor Gerald Henderson is here and wants to see him." He scowled. "'Where's my pass?' indeed!" he said, muttering.

The man got through to the commander on the visor and returned minutes later to find the professor pacing up and down, up and down. . .

"The commander says he's busy right now and will you wait, please. What do you want to see him about anyway?"

Professor Henderson was indignant. "I've written twenty-two letters to Commander Pearson about this matter, some from Mars and more recently, from Earth. He *knows* what I want to see him about," he said, his aged face twitching violently.

"Well, I don't know anything about that," said the man, his thumbs in his belt, "but the commander's busy so you'll have to wait."

The professor waited.

Twenty minutes later the commander was free and visored through that he could see his visitor now.

"Professor Gerald Henderson," announced the commander's secretary, ushering the old man into the room.

Commander Pearson stood up behind his steel desk. "Good evening, professor. Sorry to have to keep you. Urgent business. Always busy up here on the Tub, you know." He held out a hand stiffly.

"I'll come straight to the point, commander," said the professor. "You know

why I'm here. My letters. . ."

"Ah yes, your letters," said Commander Pearson, looking away.

"My letters will have told you why I have come."

"To see the *Peony*?"

"Naturally."

The commander gathered papers together on his desk, his fingers fluttering. "I'm sorry, professor. As a civilian you can't go into the spacehold without a pass."

"You could give me one."

"COULD but won't. There's been enough nonsense talked already about the *Peony* being haunted and such. We're not using her any more right now because of these same stupid rumors, but spaceships are still scarce and we shall have to put her out again eventually. I don't want you or anyone else stirring up all that gossip again. It's bad for the men's nerves."

Professor Henderson waved his briefcase under the commander's nose. "Within this case are notes, ideas, theories, reports, opinions and descriptions from fifty, sixty, a hundred different sources. All of them about the *Peony*. Thirty-four authenticated statements made by witnesses of her initial accident; twenty-two of the second one; five statements by men who have been in her; four reports from scientists and so on and so forth. All these people can't be wrong, commander. I've been gathering these things together over a large number of years, studying them, learning from them. And now I think I'm onto something. There must be some agency in that rocket that causes. . ."

Commander Pearson slapped his desk. "Professor!" he shouted, his eyes angry red. "I've already had to listen to half a dozen odd cranks who've come up here to pester me about the *Peony*. That's why I didn't answer any of your letters. Please understand that I haven't the slightest intention of letting you start these rumors up all over again. Things have quieted down a bit since the tabloids let go of it last year. I don't want anyone starting trouble all over again."

"But commander. . ."

"There are no 'buts'," said Commander Pearson. "I'm afraid I must ask you to

leave." He pressed a button. In walked his secretary.

The professor waved his briefcase. "Thirty-four witnesses of the first accident, twenty-two of the second, five..."

"I know, I know. Goodbye, professor."

The door swung to with a fizz of gas.

"LEAVING so soon, professor?" asked the man behind the reception desk.

Thoughts scampered furiously within the professor's mind. There might still be a chance of getting to the *Peony* if he was careful. He had no intention of giving up the chase so soon, especially as he had reached the Tub and was so near the object of his search.

"Er, well, my official business is over but I'm intrigued by the Tub," he said. "Never been up here before. I wonder if someone could take a few minutes off to show me 'round?" He watched the commander's secretary walk back along the corridor. He had spoken fairly softly so that the man should not hear, but in the silence of the reception chamber his voice might have carried. He held his breath, watching. The man did not turn but walked the length of the corridor and went out.

"Show you 'round?" said the man at the desk. "Well now, I guess we could manage that. Of course, without a pass you'll only be allowed in the administration and recreation levels."

"Naturally, naturally," agreed the professor.

The man clicked a visor on his desk. "Mason? Is Logan down there? There's a Professor Henderson here who says he's never been in the Tub before and can we find someone to show him around. He's completed his official business and I thought... Yes, that's right, Professor Gerald Henderson. Right." He switched off the visor, turning to the professor. "Logan's coming up. He just loves showing folk over the Tub. A youngster. Very enthusiastic."

Logan came up, all pinkness and youth. "Professor Henderson?"

"That's right."

"I'm very pleased to meet you, sir. I've read some of your books. Never thought I'd meet you, though."

They walked down the corridor together with the young man saying: "Now about that piece in your last book about alien life forms..."

They walked and they talked and at last they came into a large rest room, deserted at this hour of the evening. The professor caught hold of Logan's arm. "There's something I'd like to ask you. Can we sit down for a moment?"

"Why surely, professor," said Logan.

They sat down together on a cloud-rubber couch. Restful music hummed from the walls. The professor turned to his companion. "I'd better start by telling you that your commander has just given me instructions to leave the Tub. I came up here to try and look at the *Peony* and he told me he didn't want anyone starting the rumors all over again." There. It was out. And if he had judged Logan correctly the youngster would be interested.

The youngster was.

"The haunted spaceship? I thought everyone had forgotten about it."

"Not me. I've studied the business from the beginning. A bee in my bonnet, if you like. An obsession, even." He waved his briefcase. "Here are a good many reports and statements about it all. Interesting but not, I fear, conclusive. To reach a conclusion I must see the *Peony*. I was hoping you might be able to help me."

Logan shook his head. "Sorry, professor. I've no pass for the spacehold since I'm not on duty and even if I did have one it would be pretty risky getting you down there."

The professor's fingers made small drumming sounds as they tapped upon his leather briefcase. His face twitched. "But there must be someone who could take me down there officially. Look, do you know anyone who's been out in the *Peony* and who might be able to take me down to the spacehold legally?"

"Sure I do. If you'd got official permission to go down any of the boys with duty passes could take you."

"Well then, couldn't you find one and tell him I'm here on official business. So far as you know I've got the commander's permission to visit the spacehold and take a look at the *Peony*."

Logan looked doubtful for a moment, then nodded. "I guess I could find some-one."

"That's the spirit," said Professor Gerald Henderson.

Logan went away and returned minutes later with a short fat man. "This is Felton, sir," said Logan. "He'll take you down to the spacehold."

The fat man held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, sir. I understand this is the official investigation of the *Peony*."

Professor Henderson smiled. "Well, in a way you're right. But Commander Pearson doesn't want too much notice taken of me while I'm here. He'd rather the *Peony* didn't get any more publicity, you understand. So if we meet anyone I'd just better be looking 'round."

**L**IGHTS were pink blisters along the walls.

In the dark cradles the spaceships snored their fitful sleeps while men ran over them like swift-moving spiders, repairing, welding, lubricating, loading.

"So this is the spacehold," said Professor Henderson, standing at the foot of the anti-grav shaft, wiping perspiration from his face and gazing about him.

"Uh-huh, and there's the *Peony*," replied Felton.

They walked across to the small one-man rocket.

"The *Peony*," said the professor softly, to himself. "The haunted rocket."

It gave off no aura of chill, no ghostly effluvia, no psychic emanations, but sat silently just like any other ordinary tug rocket, its nose pointing along the ramp towards the air lock.

"You've been up in her, haven't you Felton?"

"Yes, sir. Twice."

"Did you—did you feel anything strange?"

Felton did not look at the professor as he replied. Instead he stared at the rocket beside him, his eyes travelling over its gleaming length. "Sure I felt something strange. Everybody does when they're in her. It's as though you're not alone."

He made a faint gesture with his hand as though to explain this remark. "In the

other ships it's the loneliness that strikes you. But in the *Peony* you're never alone. Whatever it is in there won't let you feel alone. When you're in the others you feel there can't be anything anywhere except you; the stars are just things that someone's painted on the sky to fool you; the Tub is a barrel-shaped illusion; Earth's a dream you dreamed when you were a kid. That's the way you feel in the others."

"And in the *Peony*?" asked the professor.

"In the *Peony* you know that there's someone or something in there with you."

"And what about the accidents? How would you account for them?"

Felton scraped his foot about on the metal flooring. "I don't know. There are plenty of theories. Some guys talk about the ghost engineering them itself; others say it made the pilot so nervous he didn't know what he was doing. But I talked to Saunders who was piloting when the second accident took place. You knew that he went to the hospital? Well, I managed to get a few words with him before he died."

"Yes, yes. What did he say?"

"Funny thing. He said, 'It made me do it, it made me do it.'"

The professor nodded, writing furiously in a small notebook. "This second accident occurred not far from the Tub itself, didn't it?"

"That's right. Why the old *Peony* wasn't blown up altogether I can't guess. Just one of those things, I suppose. Three tubes blown but no major damage. A miracle. The pilot got cooked when he tried to repair the tubes—or that's the official story anyway."

"Hum," said Professor Henderson, finishing his writing.

Activity banged and hammered and whistled in the spacehold all about them.

"Just what is the official view on the *Peony*, professor?"

"The official view? There isn't one yet. That's more or less why I'm here. Tell me, Felton, have you any idea what makes the *Peony* different from any other rocket—besides the haunting business, I mean?"

Felton shook his head.

The professor smiled. "Well, the drive tubes are reinforced with melliium-bronze alloy. It was the only time melliium was



used. After this one experiment they discovered it was too costly a process and not really worth while. And the mellium, naturally, came from Mars. Does that suggest anything to you?"

Felton's forehead became a maze of thought wrinkles. "No," he said at last, "no, I don't think it does."

"Ah," said Professor Henderson, "I think that's where the answer lies nevertheless."

"You do?" He gazed at the shimmering bulk of the *Peony*.

"I do."

"Can you explain, sir?"

The professor shook his head slowly. "Not yet. It's just an idea I have. Just a theory. Just a thought. Nothing certain. And before I tell anyone about it I must be certain that I'm right. I *must* be certain." He banged the metal hull plates of the *Peony* with his fist. "Let's take a look inside, shall we?" he said.

COMMANDER PEARSON snapped the visor switch. "Well?" he said.

"That professor hasn't left yet, sir," reported his secretary, eyes wide. "Lemming-ton down here at reception just told me that Logan has started to show the old guy round the Tub."

"A trick!" shouted Commander Pearson, biting at a finger-nail.

"That's what I thought, sir. Shall I put out a warning on the intercom?"

"Yes, do that. Warn everybody, but above all warn the men down in the spacehold. That's where Henderson's trying to get to."

"A man is bringing Logan up now, sir. Apparently he thought the professor was here in an official capacity and he handed him over to one of the men who had a pass for the spacehold."

"Never mind all that!" said Commander Pearson, thumping on his desk. "Get that warning through right now."

The commander stood up and crossed from the visor to the far wall of his office on the first lap of a pacing up and down.

The visor light blinked and the buzzer buzzed.

"Well? Have you got him yet?"

The secretary's face was puckered in agitation. "Sir, this Professor Henderson's

been too quick for us. I got the alarm call through to spacehold too late. He's left."

"What do you mean, 'left'?"

"In the *Peony*, sir. The *Peony* was fuelled up and ready for space. Henderson took her out!"

Commander Pearson grew purple. His fingers clenched and unclenched. "The idiot! Get some tugs out after him and contact him on the radio. Put the radio contact through to me here. I want a word or two with that madman." He broke the visor connection and walked across to a vast vision plate let into the wall of his office. He pressed three studs and the plate lit up to show an arrow of light moving across the innumerable grid lines. It showed the *Peony's* path through space.

"The fool. The crank!" rasped Commander Pearson.

AND they were right. I'm not alone in here, thought Professor Gerald Henderson. Whatever it is in here with me, watching me, feeling my mind, digging at my thoughts and examining them.

The *Peony* cut its tunnel in space; a golden grasshopper in a giant leap through the black purples of space. And to anyone who might happen to glance at it from some other rocket it was just another tug rocket speeding in the midnight darkness. But to the man inside...

There is only one way to find out, thought the professor. And even then I may never be sure. I can spend a year out here in space without ever being found, without ever being seen, even, but it might not do me the slightest good.

He laughed aloud. A year! That was a laugh. He'd forgotten, for the moment, just how long he had left.

He slammed the auxiliary drives into motion.

Supposing I am wrong? Supposing it is all imagination, this haunting business? What then? I shall die a useless old man and in doing so I shall destroy a valuable rocket. Well, what of that? I haven't more than a month to go, at most, and if I plot out my trajectory correctly I shall at any rate die on Mars, I shall die at home. Besides, they can always build another rocket. And the moment of impact should tell me

whether I am right or not about the *Peony*; if I don't learn before, that is. It will be worth while crashing just to find out.

Professor Gerald Henderson continued with his thinking.

Alien life forms. Life forms so alien that no thoroughbred scientist could help but pass them over, not being able to even contemplate the possibility of life existing in such a guise. They said that Mars was a dead planet, these scientists, but they were thinking of life as they knew it and understood it—vegetable and animal life, as on Earth. They couldn't conceive of a life form that might be linked to a non-living substance such as mellium; an intelligence living in its own metal home deep within the Martian mountains. Mellium, to the Earthmen, was simply a precious metal. The engineers had taken it, pounded it, heated it, wrenched at it, twisted it, alloyed it with another metal and converted the whole, red hot, blistering, into rocket drive tubes for one special rocket—the *Peony*.

And suddenly, there within the speeding rocket, it was not a theory any longer, but a fact.

"I'm right," said Professor Henderson, aloud, as though speaking calmly to a companion, unseen, who travelled with him. There was no question about it, somehow. No doubt at all. It was as though a voice had spoken words into his ear, very softly, affirming everything that he had been thinking.

The professor's hands trembled over the controls.

"I am right!" he repeated. "And it knows what I'm trying to do. It can get inside me and understand that I know it's here with me. It won't make any accidents this time. It won't make me swing the ship the way it did before when the others were inside. There isn't any need. There isn't any need at all."

"HENDERSON — is that you?" Commander Pearson shouted furiously into the radio.

"Yes, commander. I'm afraid I beat you to the punch."

"Return to the Tub immediately."

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry!" the commander snorted.

"What do you mean, 'sorry'? I'm ordering you to return."

The *Peony* sped on, its progress registering on the commander's wall map.

"Have you read any of my books?" asked Professor Henderson.

"No, and I don't intend to."

"You should read them, commander, especially the last one. There's a chapter in it on alien life forms and the possibilities of such life forms on the different planets. This business gave me the first idea for that chapter."

"What business?"

"The *Peony*, of course. I found out that this ship was different structurally from every other rocket in one particular respect. Its drive tubes were reinforced with mellium-bronze alloy. The mellium came from Mars and, I believed, contained part of the sentient life of Mars that nobody believed ever existed."

"Nonsense. You're talking nonsense, Henderson."

"Am I? I don't think so."

"You're mad."

"Perhaps," chuckled the professor into the radio. "If I am then you're wasting your time, commander. If I'm mad I shouldn't be likely to respond to your orders, should I?"

The commander's face had reached its maximum shade of purple. "*Henderson!* Get a grip on yourself!"

"Ah, but I have got a grip on myself. Let me go on talking; I want to tell you about it."

"You're crazy."

"Quite. Now listen: I believed that the Martians might be linked to the mellium as soon as I learned that the drive tubes were the only mechanisms in which mellium had been used. And the *Peony* itself, as you will know, is reputed to be haunted. The two things linked up in my mind but I couldn't visualize the link itself for a long time. But I can now. Martian life is linked, almost symbiotically, to the mellium, commander. When the mellium is destroyed then a certain part of the intelligent life is destroyed also. But mellium is almost indestructible, which is why it was used in these drive tubes out here. But how would you feel if you were ripped up and carted

away to be burned and pounded and twisted into rocket tubes while you still retained your consciousness? You'd hate it, wouldn't you? You'd want to go back home to the cool mountains, to the peace and the quietness of home which is, in this case, Mars, wouldn't you?"

"Henderson!"

"That's right, commander. Map out my trajectory path on your vision plate. See where I'm heading?"

"Mars!"

"Exactly. Remember the accidents? Why did they occur? Because the Martians made the pilot change course suddenly, by some telepathic means. The sudden swerving was too much for the rocket. All the witnesses told of seeing the rocket lurch just prior to the explosions. The Martian wants to get back home, commander, but if I land the *Peony* on Mars what good will that do? The colonists would imprison me when they caught me and they'd return the rocket—and the Martian—to you again. And what about me? The doctors tell me that I've got a month to live at the most. I've lived all my life on Mars and I want to get back there to die. They wouldn't let me make the journey officially, since I'm a sick man and space is scarce on the transport rockets. I want to die on Mars, commander. On Mars. And does it matter whether I die in a month or in a day?"

The commander's eyes swivelled to the vision plate, to the darting arrow that registered the ship's frantic flight. "You're going to crash her on Mars," he said, strangely without emotion.

"You're quite correct," said the professor, "but that isn't the important thing to me, you know. What I'm really doing is simply taking two Martians back to their home. Goodbye, commander."

Plunk went the radio, the connection breaking.

On Mars, in the bright sunlight of a clear day, near the red mountains, upon the golden sandy beaches, men stood, craning their heads to watch.

"A rocket, isn't it?"

"Guess so."

"She'll never land at that speed."

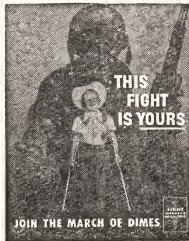
"What's up over there?" cut in a third voice, roughly. "You men gone to sleep? We've got to get this ore shipped into the gyro by 1700 hours and if you just stand there gawking at the sky..."

The speaker stopped, looking upwards. "Holy Moses, she's travelling!"

"Can't be a mail rocket, and the relief ain't due for three more days. What...?"

"Maybe it's a Martian," someone said.

The others laughed just as Professor Henderson crashed the *Peony*.



# GIVE BACK A WORLD

By RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

*What did Fane know about Mercury that he never told?  
For instance, a push-button war, fifty million years old,  
that had been put into cold storage . . . dead storage . . .  
but maybe not quite dead?*

RED signal lights winked on, on the white walls that surrounded the tiers of bunks there in the belly of the *Sun Child*. Tension sharpened. Crap and card games broke up. Last-minute checking of gear and weapons was dropped, as five hundred men of the Survey Service climbed into their bunks for the deceleration.

This would be only the second time that Terrans, surging out to colonize the planets, had reached Mercury, the Paradox World.

As he pocketed the cards, there was only a brief flicker in Fane's pale eyes, suggesting to Rick Mills that he was a bad loser at poker. But the savage glint was masked at once.

Fane's low, broad forehead crinkled. "You lucky stiff, Mills," he said with a shrug and a grin. "Well, I don't need to win money now."

Rick knew Frank Fane some after three months of journeying from Earth cooped up in a space transport with him. He seemed a fairly good Joe, some ways. He never lent or borrowed anything. That was sound policy. Or independence carried to a fault. Besides, Rick had an idea that Fane's thin face was a flexible mask, too inclined to act out the surface he wished to show, instead of revealing his honest emotions. And his sly hints, which never told very much about Mercury, seemed Satanically designed to provoke dread in less experienced listeners.

Here came Fane's great distinction. He was the sole survivor of the Martell Expedition, the one man alive who had been on the most sunward world. Six months he'd spent there. That made him an object of awe in younger eyes. It also inspired insidious doubts about him.

And the one thing that set Rick Mills a little apart from other hard young experts that had recently graduated from the Survey Service School on Mars, and who now formed most of the five hundred aboard the *Sun Child*, was that he had almost made friends with Fane. Curiosity, and warmth toward people had prompted the effort. And wariness before suspicion.

From his bunk across from Rick's, Fane now spoke:

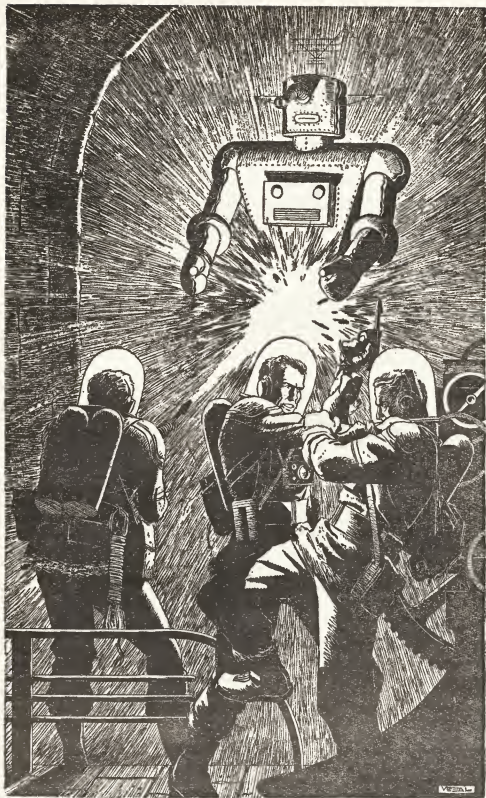
"Well, here we go. Just a few more minutes. The end of book learning, eh, you guys? The beginning of experience. I wonder if all of us will still be alive inside of twenty-four hours?"

Maybe it wasn't malicious humor. Maybe it was just the brutal kind of joshing that helps to make men.

"Shut up, Fane," Rick joshed back in the tough manner that Fane seemed to like in him. "Keep on your toes yourself or you might be the first to die."

Fane chuckled. "Always the smart boy, eh, Mills?" Better keep it up. Because Mercury's a crazy place. It's the planet closest to the sun. But it forgot to turn on its axis ages ago. So the dark side is colder than Pluto must be. But on the solar side your space boots can slosh into wetness that you might believe is water. Umhm-m. Only it turns out to be a puddle of molten lead.

"Hell, you guys have always known stuff like that. So why repeat myself? When there are interesting circumstances? A push-button war fifty million years old that got put into cold storage, for instance. Dead storage. But maybe not quite dead. I wouldn't know, for sure. How about getting mixed up with that?"



Some strange jubilation seemed to possess Fane.

The retard-jets of the *Sun Child* thundered to check vast speed. Conversation died as, from the zero of free-fall, weight rose to five gravities, pushing the corners of men's mouths back toward their ears.

Still, in spite of the strains in his own stocky, muscular body, Rick Mills kept an eye cocked at the long, sinewy shape that was Fane, prone on taut canvas across the aisle. Fane's grimace remained reckless.

With the mystery of Mercury at hand, Rick was like his companions. He thought some of home. Minnesota. His folks. Anne Munson. Anne who was on Mars, at the Survey Service School. They could use girls for certain less rugged jobs, Rick thought of her picture in his pocket. Honeydew hair. Cool, pleasant eyes. And under her smile her scribbled, half-kidding challenge:

*"Find us a world, Rick!"*

Well, it would never be hellish Mercury. No place for a girl.

RICK also thought that he would have liked to like Fane if he could. Now didn't seem the right time. His veiled bragging and shows of insolence had begun to exceed the limit, even for rough men. And there were too many questions in Rick's mind now. Was Fane struggling to keep some inner elation from showing too much? What did he want from life? Wealth, maybe? Did he have a Mercurian secret that led toward what he wished to accomplish?

Rick's cold feeling found its chief source in the Martell Expedition to Mercury of a year ago. Just Martell, Jacobs, and Fane—the pilot and mechanic—in a small, long-range rocket ship.

On his return, Fane of course couldn't be evasive in his written report to the Interplanetary Colonial Board. It had been published. Rick could remember parts of it almost word for word:

"...We had gone a hundred miles into the dark hemisphere with the tractor. Martell wandered off alone. Jacobs and I found him with a hole in the back of his oxygen helmet. Falling backward onto a sharp rock could have done it. The hole let the air out of his space suit, and the cold in...

"Jacobs ended up just about the same,

two Earth weeks later. Except that it was on the hot, sunward hemisphere..."

Once again Rick thought that it was a little queer that two resourceful men should fall victims to the same accident even if roasting and freezing looked like the classic ways to die on Mercury.

Rick longed primitively just then to drive his fists into Fane's narrow jaw. Was he a liar and a murderer? If so, what was his motive?

But then Rick was almost ashamed. The Colonial Board seemed to have accepted the report. And that Fane had brought the bodies of his companions, preserved by Mercurian conditions, back to Earth, was a minor hero's deed, wasn't it?

Other of Fane's written comments came back in Rick's mind:

"There is far more frozen air and water on Mercury's dark side than there should be..."

"Several times I may have imagined glimpsing movement. Once I thought I saw something small scurry into hiding under some ancient wreckage. I tried to dig it out. I don't know what it was..."

"There are ruins and much ancient junk on Mercury. Martian stuff. And from Planet X. As could be expected... Left alone while I waited for favorable relative orbital positions for a return to Earth, my investigations of things on Mercury were somewhat limited, however..."

Such were Fane's sketchy notes, supplemented by a few blurred photographs that had been salvaged from much film that had been obviously ruined by a small radiation leak from his rocket's A-jets. But as for the wreckage he had written of, everyone knew that Earth wasn't the first world to colonize other planets. Remembering, Rick Mills felt mingled fascination and dread.

Fifty million years ago Mars and Planet X had been rivals. On Earth, the evidence of their final war must have been trampled under foot by the last of the dinosaurs, buried by volcanoes and rusted away by the damp climate. About the same had happened on Venus.

But on Earth's moon there still were gigantic bomb craters. And a few bright new weapons and engines of war, preserved perfectly by the vacuum. And two kinds of



grotesque, dried-out corpses. In Mars' thin air and dryness, there still had been much weathering. But the fused-down, glassy remains of its cities, still slightly radioactive, lingered to show how the Martians had been wiped out.

The end of Planet X had been even more spectacular. Some colossal projectile must have drilled to its center to blow it apart, and form the thousands of fragments that were the asteroids. Drifting among them were the shattered cornices and columns of buildings, broken and cindered instruments and machines, art works, whatnot. So, two splendid technologies had perished with their creators.

Till on Earth science had risen again to challenge the primitive solar system. There were rich metals to be dug, new cities to be built for growing populations, adventures to be had, and knowledge to be gained and regained.

Mercury, too, had certainly been mixed up with that violent past. And now it hovered, a disturbing enigma, in both the immediate and the farther future. In only moments, now, that past would blend with the present. His—Rick Mills' present. Fane would be in it, too. With the brassy taste of worry before the nameless in his mouth, Rick realized how easy it might be to be unjustly suspicious. So he tried to fight off his tension, which most of his companions must share in some degree. He tried to substitute an adventurous eagerness.

Amid gusts of fire from its underjets the *Sun Child* thudded down at the old Martell campsite in Mercury's Twilight Belt which rings the planet between its hot and cold hemispheres. Here there is day and night of a sort. For Mercury, wobbling a little in its eccentric orbit, does not always keep exactly the same face turned sunward. In the Twilight Belt the sun sometimes rises slightly above the horizon, and then sinks back. Here there is no terrible heat or cold.

Everything was done now with swift precision. Like establishing a beachhead in some Earth-conflict of years ago. These five hundred men of the Survey Service, though civilians, functioned like a small army. They were the vanguard of research workers that must spearhead the occupation of yet an-

other world. Bookish and academic they might seem, but they were trained for great ruggedness, too.

Working in space suits, they strung a security perimeter of electrified barbed wire around the ship. Breastworks were built and weapons were mounted against the unknown. Air tight tents to house testing instruments were set up and inflated. Everyone—Rick Mills, Lattimer, Turino, Finden, Schmidt, Horton, and the hundreds of others—toiled hard.

THEN there was time to really look around. The dry rusty plain bore patches of low vegetation, with crinkly, silver-gray whorls. Lichen, it looked like. A sad remnant of life. In the all-but airless sky stars blazed, even though a white hot silver of the sun peeped above the brooding horizon, beyond which, for all one knew, great metal shapes might hide, waiting, preparing an ambush.

Nostrand, the leader of this expedition, held an aneroid barometer in his gloved hand. He was gray as iron, square-built of face and body, with widely separated teeth. He grinned, now, and spoke through his helmet radiophone:

"Funny. There's a wisp of air left. Small as it is, and with a gravity only one-fourth that of Earth, Mercury shouldn't have been able to hold down much of an atmosphere for more than a few thousand years. It should be as dead as our moon by now. A minor riddle, eh?"

Nostrand's tones fell, almost unnoticed, into a hollow stillness. Fane was standing near. He said nothing, but Rick Mills saw him grinning like a Cheshire cat.

Eyes continued to grope all around—at newness to them which was eons old. In the near distance was what seemed a highway. It ran east and west. One end vanished among the gloomy hills, at the fringe of the frigid hemisphere of eternal night. The other end reached straight across the plain toward where the top edge of the sun blazed supernally. In that direction the Twilight Belt turned gradually into unequalled desert.

Sunward along that highway, several ruined domes were visible, like scattered castles. They looked ancient Martian. Be-

yond them, out of sight, there must be others—buildings never made to offer shelter from the continuous, blazing radiation to which they were now exposed.

Also in sight on the highway was the wreck of a great turtle-like war engine, its triangular prow marking it as a probable product of Planet X. Doubtless, too, it had been an automatic, unmanned thing, capable of seeking out enemies by radar, and attacking, on its own, even without remote control. But if there was fear among those who saw it that the energy in it would be reawakened by their presence, this was dispelled as far as it was concerned. It lay on its side, torn out of shape, knocked out on the road those ages ago.

"Jeez!" some young guy muttered.

Then Nostrand spoke again, expressing most everyone's mood:

"Mercury was different when it rotated on its axis. Torrid, yes. But solar heat was nowhere continuous. Nor was darkness and cold. There were nights to cool off the heat of day. But the tidal drag of the too-near sun slowed the rotation. It must have stopped rather suddenly, as a wheel spinning against considerable friction stops. Then everything on Mercury changed, became extreme. It must have happened just about when the Martians and Xians were fighting each other. Maybe both sides held part of the planet at first . . ."

Nostrand's tone was musing and remote, hinting at pictures of ancient history. In his mind Rick Mills saw those dim pictures. His hide tingled. And his eyes combed the surrounding hills and plain warily. Was he looking for strange movement? This thought was tied up with the knowledge that, as on the moon, automatic machines could be perfectly preserved for millions of years here on weatherless Mercury, and that in some of them power might still be triggered into action by the disturbance of something penetrating a radio aura around them.

Rick spent some minutes with this scrutiny. By mood, nothing but a little dust and scant air molecules ever should stir on this tomblike planet. Once he may have imagined something small crawling on a hillside. But the second time, in a boulder-strewn gulch toward the dark hemisphere,

and only a quarter-mile away, he could not be mistaken. A shape, hunched under a heavily loaded rucksack, was hurrying and dodging away. A man in space armor!

Rick gasped. He glanced around and then cursed. At once he had thought of Fane. Fane had been present moments ago. Now he was gone. Somehow Rick wished mightily that he had not lost sight of him for an instant.

"There goes Fane!" Rick yelled, pointing.

But while others took up the cry, Rick spied a piece of white notepaper at his feet. He picked it up and read:

"I'll drop this where you'll find it, Mills. So long. Thanks for the interest in me. It's flattering. I feel something is going to happen. I'm a lone wolf, unused to schoolbook greenhorns, I'm playing it single, and taking French leave. It's safer. I know you're supposed to go with a bunch into the dark hemisphere. Maybe I'll see you—if you live. Fane . . ."

Others read the note over Rick's shoulders. And other voices expressed some of Rick's scattered thoughts.

"Damn Fane! Something screwy about him. I always knew . . ."

"Sure! What's he trying to pull? What does he know about Mercury that he never told? Running out on us, now, huh? Six months he spent here once. Bet he did kill Martell and Jacobs! What is he after now? And what has he found out about the war machines that must be here? . . ."

"Easy, guys. No wolf-pack talk. . ."

"Easy—hell! If he didn't know his way around he'd never be wandering off like that on foot! His running off means no good . . ."

Then someone raised a long-range blaster. But before it could be fired at the dodging and elusive Fane, Nostrand struck the weapon down. The runaway had already reached the darkward foothills.

"It's no use trying to stop him now," Nostrand said.

"Fane—do you hear me?" Rick called, his helmet radiophone giving his voice the needed range. "Tell me, what's the pitch?"

Rick heard Fane's derisive and harsh laugh. "I told you, didn't I, smart boy Mills?" he taunted. "Or are you all stupid?"

The laugh and the words revealed more

of Fane's nature to Rick than he'd ever seen before. The ego, the vanity, flaunted now because of some hidden advantage. Doubtless it salved an inferiority. Rick would have liked to like Fane. But now that big lanky man, for all his show of competence, was like a poisonous child.

Rick felt an amused smirk coming out on his own face in spite of his sense of the presence of masked danger. "Somebody has got the idea that he's super, Fane," he chuckled. "I wonder how that old, tiresome thing happened to you. Maybe you had a bitter, frustrated youth. Kids beat you up, hunh? So now you're the bigshot who makes monkeys out of everybody. Well, go play your marbles . . ."

Final response was only another harsh laugh.

For secrecy, Rick now cut off his radio, and established a sound-channel for his voice by grasping Nostrand's shoulder.

"We've got to follow him, Chief. See what he's up to," he said.

Nostrand nodded, and beckoned Schmidt, who was supposed to lead the pre-planned party into the dark hemisphere, to come closer. Nostrand spoke softly, with his phone also shut off:

"Of course. Things will proceed about as we intended. With the primary purpose of scientific exploration. But we'll cut the parties to ten men each to risk less personnel. One party with specially shielded space suits and tractors will invade the sunward hemisphere, while you folks will go the other way."

**W**ITHIN an hour, under Schmidt's able command, Rick and his other companions were moving along the highway toward the shadowy eastern hills, with two tractors fitted with pressurized cabins. Rick and two other men, Lattimer and Finden, rode atop the lead vehicle as lookouts.

Rick thought of how flexible a Survey Service guy had to be. Here their intended work was to learn about Mercury—to dig, even, into its crust, searching out its mineral wealth and learning its history, even back far beyond the rivalry of the Martians and Xians. A steaming, fast-spinning little world, it must have been once. And of course its now dubious value to modern

civilization and economics must be judged.

But now another duty was added—something of criminal detection! There was suspicion without proof. Doubt that might be groundless, almost. Or that might point to a deadly unknown.

What must be Fane's tracks in the dust, were visible in one place for about a mile, along the hard-surfaced road. But then they vanished among the rocks. And what sense was there to try to hunt him out of the hills? Schmidt gave no such order. And Rick realized fully, then, that it was not so important to find Fane himself, but to learn what fabulous mystery it was that had made him hurry into this wilderness alone. Something tremendous must be at stake.

Miles were covered swiftly at first, making the sliver of sun sink from view to the rear. But one pale wing of the solar corona—a reminder, here, of the final sunset so long ago—still projected above the horizon, providing ghostly illumination. There was little talk, but Rick Mills felt as if he was invading some immense and haunted cellar, covering half a planet.

For young Finden to photograph, there were domed structures, vast buildings that might have been factories, huge slag heaps from mines, even the still standing trunks of trees, that had been perhaps developed from Martian stock. Thicker and thicker layers of frost and frozen air were over everything. And scattered along the road were the scars and wreckage of violence. Here, wood had been blackened by fire. Here, dug in the ground, had been a fortified strong point and supply-dump, full of toppled cylinders. Here there were dried-out, blackened corpses. The Martians, their many tentacles stiffened to the consistency of old wood, looked like charred tree-stumps. The Xians, with but four boneless limbs, were like deflated sacks of old leather.

There were great tanklike machines, of both Martian and Xian origin, blasted, and grotesquely toppled into ditches. There were metal forms, vaguely human and similarly torn. Here was all the evidence of battle and of Martian retreat. Mile by mile they must have been driven back toward some fortress deep in the now dark hemisphere.

And what comments were there to make now, about all this archaic fury that had gone silent and moveless those eons past? In momentary contact with their space suits, Rick Mills heard Finden's "Jeez!" and Lattimer's monosyllabic and awed curses. Fane had said something about a push-button war put into deep freeze.

"That's about the size of it," Rick said once to his companions. "Everything is in deep-freeze—almost absolute zero, and a vacuum, besides. No method of preservation could be much better."

It was as if here on the dark hemisphere, time had stopped with the ending of the passing days that measured it. Nowhere else in the solar system could the remains of that old conflict be better kept. And nowhere else were they more profuse.

It was hard not to think, now, that it was unwise to have come here so rashly. Rick had the feeling of having plunged too far into enemy territory where his bunch could be ambushed. For those war machines were not all smashed, certainly. Time meant nothing to them here. And the mystery of their function was half known from others like them on other worlds. There was always the chance that some of them would respond to the stimulus of detected movement around them. They were known to have intricate electronic relay systems inside them, almost brains.

"Keep your necks swivelling and your eyes peeled," Schmidt told his watchers on the tractor top, in a brief helmet phone message from inside the cabin.

"Don't worry, we will, Chief!" Lattimer growled back.

Overhead blazed the same constellations of stars known on Earth. Venus was glorious among them. Earth was dimmer—farther off. And it was the brilliance of that space-like star curtain that limned the first ugly moving silhouette. One of the man-like monsters was on the road ahead, its arms raised. Its great jutting thumbs of metal might have been the sort of things that had punctured the helmets of Martell and Jacobs. Perhaps this colossus had awakened on its own, as has been suggested. On the other hand, it might have been commanded by remote control, operating through radio impulses, of which the

static-like whispers, barely noticeable in Rick's phones, might be the evidence.

To signal, Rick pounded on the roof of the tractor's cabin. And the men below fired their main blaster at once. The dazzling blue flash of neutrons tore the metal giant apart with a spattering of incandescence. But then something fired back. There were two concussions and a blinding glare. Rick felt himself hurtling.

When he scrambled out of a deep snow-like drift, both tractors were blossoming white-hot vapors from their insides. In their cabins, no one could still survive. Schmidt, or any of the others. The lump was hard in Rick's throat, and the blur was thick and angry in his mind. He scrambled along the ditch, keeping down, firing at little shapes that scurried on the road. They were oval, half a foot long, like tortoises, but much faster. He'd seen their like at the Survey Service School brought from Earth's moon. Deadly little robots from X. They scuttled for cover. No use trying to dig them out. They were as elusive as rats. And they could fire atomic pellets.

Two more Earth-made blasters had been in action.

"We're still with you, Rick!" Finden risked saying by phone.

"Yeah, all I got out of it was some bruised ribs," Lattimer who was older, joined in, hiding a wince of pain.

WHILE they were taping up a weak spot in Lattimer's armor, something spitting blue, like a rocket, arced overhead, and Rick was sure he heard a derisive chuckle in his phones. Fane.

"Damn him!" Lattimer snarled. "At the very least Fane would know how to use some of these machines after six months here. He'd know how to travel fast . . ."

Again, against the possibility of their conversation being overheard they were speaking directly by contact-transmitted sound.

"Keep down and tune in on camp," Rick said. "We can listen, anyway."

They heard strange noises. And then Nostrand's voice saying: "... We're under attack. A dozen war-robots. Parties afield please don't answer if there is danger of giving away your positions by radio-direct-

tion finder . . . Ship already disabled . . ."

"It *must* be Fane doing it," young Finden snarled.

"Maybe. Not necessarily," Lattimer answered. "The question is, what do we do? Try to get back to camp on foot?"

Rick was younger and less experienced than the middle aged Lattimer but he felt the force of leadership coming over him. Most of it, perhaps, was fury, bringing the drive out in him—and bringing out an idea.

"We'd be of small use in camp," he said, "even if we could get there. Come on—crawl! . . ."

Rick had spied another Martian corpse, half-buried in a blanket of frozen air and frost a little way down the ditch. They reached it, and Rick ripped open the thin, rubberlike integument that had served its kind as space armor. Among its weird equipment Rick found a pouch held close to its hardened flesh. He drew out a parchment.

"Should have thought of this before," he growled. "In war they carried maps—Martians and Xians alike. Now let's see. What looks important on the dark hemisphere? Something that a guy like Fane would go for. If that's the way it is . . ."

The three men huddled together, squinting at the stiffened parchment in the dim light of the solar corona. Dark lines showed highways passing between jagged markings that must be mountain ranges. Rick coordinated what he knew of Mercury from astronomical photographs taken at the great observatory on the moon, with what he saw on the map, and thus found out where he and his companions were.

His attention was drawn inevitably to a great golden circle on the parchment. All roads led to it.

"No matter how you stack it, that must be the place we want to reach," Rick said. "But it's four thousand miles away."

"I see there's a tunnel, too," Lattimer joined in. "That heavy red line. I know Martian maps. It's for a kind of jet-train. Am I cockeyed to think that some cars might still work? . . . If we could get to a tunnel entrance. But it's fifty miles at the nearest. Some walk!"

"We're stranded in a white hell, with a good chance of being knocked off before

we die from more natural causes," Finden said. "So we've got to think boldly. How about finding something like what Fane seemed to be using? Then we could rocket to that golden circle place."

"Yeah—'*finding*,'" Rick retorted. "Then there's the question of our being able to fly it in a hurry. Uh-uh—the tunnel's a long shot, too, but a better bet. If we can locate a large, flat sheet of metal, we can bend up one end for a prow and use our blasters for reaction-propulsion to improvise a toboggan that will ski over the frozen air and frost."

They crept further along the ditch to get away from the deadly little ovoids that must still lurk near. Then they arose and ran. There was a dazzling blast from behind them, and they ran faster, maybe a mile or more, stumbling through deep drifts of white.

They came to more Xian wreckage. Hurriedly they searched, as some vague bulk prowled, far off to their left. But at last they found and shaped what they wanted. They crouched on the sheet of metal, and fired continuous streams of protons rearward. Soon their arms, braced against the thrust of incandescent fire, ached furiously.

The weapons were hot in their hands. But under the rocket-like kick of the blasters they made speed even though their makeshift toboggan, unguided by runners, careened crazily. The hour it took to cover fifty miles seemed an age.

Rick thought of Anne Munson, his girl, at the Survey Service School on Mars. But such sweet ruminations had no place here. He pushed them aside angrily. He wondered if Mercury would ever be worth anything, anymore. Mines it had, yes, but with one hemisphere frozen like this, and the other a furnace, would it ever be worth the trouble to build the insulated camps that would be needed to work those mines? Even the completely airless asteroids were less forbidding. And out there, in those fragments of a world, the metal-rich core of a planet was exposed for easy exploitation.

Dull fury took hold of Rick. At Fane. But more at the past, here. Wasted violence, buried in drifts of frozen atmosphere. Wasted energy. Why couldn't those beings

have done better?

Near the end of the journey the toboggan hit a granite outcropping, that projected an inch above the layer of white, which was deeper here, farther inside the dark hemisphere. Rick and his companions were hurled cartwheeling into the drifts. It was minutes before they were conscious enough to move again.

Only Lattimer's pistol was not yet quite burnt out. So their crude vehicle was now useless. They had to continue toward the tunnel on foot.

"Somewhere around here," Rick muttered at last. "By the map, there should be an entrance. Don't know where we're going but we've got to hurry."

Looming dark and shattered under the stars was a tower. The three men struggled toward it. A shape was following them again.

Somehow they got inside the tower. Drifted atmosphere gave way under their feet. They were sliding down a kind of chute. It felt like the end of things. But in a minute they slid into an underground chamber. They wandered for a while amid Martian apparatus. They could still recognize transmutation equipment, though its vats and grids were cast in an un-Earthly form. The walls themselves glowed softly.

The injured Lattimer was the most exhausted but he still showed interest in things.

"The silicon in rock has an atomic structure not so far from that of oxygen and nitrogen, hasn't it?" he mused. "It could be redesigned a little. And the waste protons and electrons from the process could be used to make hydrogen for water. Besides, there's a lot of oxygen in mineral oxides. And water of crystallization, locked up, but ready made . . . Water and air from rock! Earthmen can do that, too. Here the Martians must have done it all the time, replenishing the air and water constantly, and building up the supply. And when Mercury stopped rotating it just froze up here on the dark hemisphere, where, in solid form, it couldn't leak away into space anymore. It was just kept forever. So that much is explained. The Martians must have had a lot of these factories."

"Yeah, sure," young Finden growled.

"Let's skip that, now. We've got to find the tunnel vehicles."

"We'll find them," Rick promised with a drunken sort of confidence. "And they should work if they aren't smashed. Preservation is perfect."

They moved as in a dream. But Rick was right. They descended a ramp. The frost of air around them was unmarked by footprints other than their own. They crept into a projectile-like car on a track, and fastened the door. The marvelous simplification of controls was evidence of an advanced technology. Was it so strange after all that when Rick pressed the throttle gingerly, a blast of atomic flame burst from the stern of the car, setting it in motion after so long?

Speed mounted. Colliding with anything in that tunnel would have brought the men unknowing death. But now the throttle was limp and unresponsive. So what was there to do but rely anxiously on probable automatic guiding devices? In minutes the car covered four thousand miles, and then stopped by itself with a soft, innocuous jolt.

Finden undugged the portal of the projectile by working levers not made for human hands. Again the glowing walls gave light. Boots made grating sounds. So there was air, too. Gaseous, not frozen.

Again they wandered through passages and rooms. Here was a great underground fortress and supply depot. Metal crates and boxes were stacked high. There were hugely buttressed walls, some of them ruptured and repaired. Martian and Xian corpses, relics of a last battle, lay dried out and blackened on the floor.

At last the men came to a long vaulted hall. Near them was the breach of a colossal tube, ten yards in diameter. Beyond it was another and another, a whole bank of them, fifty in a row, slanting slightly upward and disappearing into the metal wall.

THE men sensed it at once—in this colossal setup must be what they had come to see. Here was the mysterious center of things.

They might have spoken of this aloud. But in this age-old place they were warned to silence. And it wasn't all intuition and



wariness. For along the center of that hall, the dust was almost obliterated by human bootprints.

Stepping very lightly, Rick and his companions hid behind a metal column where a mummified Martian sprawled on the pavement amid heaps of parchment. Nearby was an Xian corpse.

Then they heard a voice. A whisper, almost. It came to their ears directly as sound, penetrating easily the insulating texture of their oxygen helmets:

"Give back a world . . . Me . . ."

It was a man's gloating mutter to himself. A vain man's promise to his ego, which the frustrations and competition of life had made swollen, like a cancer.

Then they saw his blurred shadow on the wall. Thin, hunched over, working at something. Fane all right. He had arrived here ahead of them, by rocket vehicle. No chance could be taken, questioning him. That could be done when and if he was overpowered.

Rick Mills raced around the column and leaped. But the scrape of his space-boots was a small warning. Fane was almost able to meet him with the muzzle of a blaster. But Rick, hurtling into him with his shoulder, grabbed his wrist, and the weapon skittered across the floor. Yet though his face-window was open, Fane wore a space armor, too. It protected him from the onslaught. Besides, he was not near exhaustion. And his thin muscles were like wire cables. Moreover, he fought as if for all he had ever hoped for. Some terrific prize. He was like a silent maniac.

Even so, Rick almost pinned him down. Lattimer recovered the blaster. Finden was leaping. But Fane touched controls on a square box at his belt. A strange old box.

In obvious response, an Xian colossus of metal dashed forward from a far corner, its gleaming thumbs poised. Rick, dodging to one side, was forced to loosen his hold a little. Fane tore free.

Lattimer used the blaster. With a dazing glare its neutron stream cut the legs from the robot. The latter clanked to the floor.

"You found a remote control device, Fane," Rick accused. "The war robots are largely automatic, but you are directing

them. Why?"

Fane made no denial. His face was a grimace of fury. He lunged behind another pillar.

"Get him before he really brings hell down on us!" Rick yelled.

Lattimer blazed away. Finden, who still had his original blaster, did likewise, discharging the weapon's last energy.

Incandescent chunks were torn from the walls and columns. Rick, Finden, and Lattimer ran after Fane but he managed always to keep some obstacle between them and himself. Twice, metal giants lunged at his pursuers and were cut down.

One victory the three loyal Survey Service men had. They drove Fane from that hall, with its row of the breech-ends of great tubes. Had he been able to stay a minute longer, calling more ancient battle forces to his aid, they would have been killed without further delay.

But there was defeat, too, in his escape from the hall. Considering what forces he must wield outside that was far from good.

Rick and his companions chased Fane up a spiral ramp, where the horny tendrils of Martians must once have scurried, and where, at the last, Xians must have fought them. Up and up the spiral went—it was hard to say how far. At last it seemed to be ascending inside a tower, for there were windows glazed with some clear substance. But beyond these panes, and close against them, there was nothing but whiteness. The tower was all but buried.

The climb ended in a round chamber fitted with an airlock. But when the men reached the latter, Fane had already passed through it to the outside.

Rick rubbed the rime of frozen atmosphere from a window, and they all peered out at a level waste, pale under the stars. Here at the center of the dark hemisphere, the deposit of congealed oxygen and nitrogen and water was so deep that it seemed even to have buried the mountains utterly. Perhaps the tower itself was on a mountain top. Even so, only its cupola projected above the desolation.

That and a row of gigantic pipe ends slanting upward from the super-frigid drifts. Their maws yawned black in the still bleakness.

For a moment the men almost forgot Fane, as they wondered what it was that they looked upon.

"Space ship launching tubes?" Finden suggested.

"I'm thinking of something else," Lattimer answered, his voice hollow and awed, yet somehow less tired.

"So am I," Rick put in. "I'm thinking of the breech-ends of these same tubes down below. And of an ordinary Fourth of July pinwheel made to spin by the tangential reaction of the gases of old fashioned gunpowder. And of what that screwball, Fane, muttered to himself. 'Give back a world.' Yeah. What was it that killed Mercury as a reasonably habitable planet?"

"I see what you mean," Finden growled. "Mercury stopped rotating. But about the rest you're absolutely nuts."

"Are we?" Lattimer challenged. "Does making a world rotate again, seem too big a job for a bank of atomic jets the size of these aimed just above the horizon? Those old Martians could have done it. And maybe our people could, too, allowing years of work and vast expenditure."

At that moment Rick Mills understood Frank Fane as never before.

"So this is supposed to be Fane's glory," Finden mused hoarsely, his eyes wide. "To give a ruined world back to civilization. Restore it. Not bad for an unknown pug-ugly even if the bug in his head says he has to kill everybody around and blame it on old war machines running amok by themselves so that there will be no division of triumph; so that, with all of us dopes dead, he'll look even bigger."

Lattimer's lips twisted. They were about to utter curses. But then, beyond the window, there was a dazzling flare of light. The men didn't ask what kind of missile had been launched against them. That they fairly tumbled down the spiral was all that saved their lives.

The terrible roar of sound itself seemed enough to kill. Automatic portals clanged above them to shut off the outrush of air and the influx of vaporized metal and radioactivity.

"We've got to block all entrances to the jet room!" Rick shrieked. "And we've got to see that there are no tin soldiers running

around loose. Then . . ." Rick's voice trailed away.

With the blaster that had been Fane's, Lattimer brought down tunnel-roofs, barricading himself and his companions in the hall where the bases of the tubes were, behind tons of wreckage. It might help.

"FANE will try to dig us out, but now it should take a little time, I hope," Rick said. "We're buried deep in rock and snow and congealed atmosphere. And he probably hasn't enough war engines assembled around here to really try to blast through to us."

"So what do we do?" Finden demanded.

"Look around to see what we *can* do," Lattimer shot back at him.

They went down the row of great jet tubes. To Rick's and Lattimer's trained eyes basic principles of function of these jets were not too hard to trace out. Regardless of what monsters on what world invented a thing, natural law remained the same. And so the shaping of metal and the directing of forces in any device had to remain the same everywhere.

"The setup isn't quite finished," Rick said. "Certain breech details aren't hooked together yet. But you can see where they go. Say, Fane must have spent most of his first six months on Mercury here in this vault trying to put what was left to do in order! A lot of these final touches must be his. He thought he could complete everything alone."

The evidence was clear. Empty food containers of Earthly origin were scattered about the floor. There were tools from the same source. And boxes of parts, made so long ago on Mars, were fairly free of dust, showing that they had been opened and their contents fastened into place quite recently in the gigantic assembly. And in one corner of this chamber a small Terran tent had been set up.

Fane had been working on something here when these three men had first found him. So now they went to see just what it was. They found a spread parchment on a work bench. It was blueprint stuff. Red lines traced the structure of the tube breeches. There were the fuel ducts in which an air blast fed the dust of uranium, and the ex-

citer grids needed for firing. And there was the hookup of cables and bus-bars, needed to bind the whole bank of jets into a unit.

On the work bench there was even a book of advanced engineering brought from Earth. It lay open to a page on space ship motors.

Rick Mills saw more of the twisted soul of a man in the presence of that volume. "Poor Fane," he growled with bitter sarcasm. "Always making cracks about being bookish. Yet he found that he didn't have quite the knowledge to finish the assembly when he came here with Martell. He had to go home, study, get books."

"Given time, we can do what he can do," Finden said. "The still missing parts must be here somewhere."

"The Martians were close to completing the job themselves," Lattimer mused. "The Xians might have done it, too. I wonder just how it happened that Mercury was not reclaimed."

"Failure was also near," Rick said. "You can see that the Xians broke in through the underground fortifications with their robots. Meanwhile, on the hills outside, the snow of air was falling after the cold which followed the last sunset. There was a fight in these chambers at close quarters. The Xians had wanted to seize the setup intact, so they must have tried hard not to damage the main machinery here. But when they won, they lost. Maybe the news came that X was blown to pieces by Martian atomic science. Panic took hold, I'll bet. They fled Mercury, perhaps hardly believing that home was gone."

Rick's voice had become almost a harsh whisper. A savage bitterness smoldered in him. Around him, in the disorder of this chamber, and in the mummies of the two kinds of beings who had died, he saw how violence had blocked a great public work of peaceful constructiveness, and for fifty million years had robbed Mercury of a better destiny. For all of those ages it might have been a living, useful world instead of a half frozen, half sun-blasted tomb.

And was the same misfortune going to be repeated now because Fane was a childish damn fool?

From far above there came a thudding vibration. Fane was beginning his attack

and Rick was by no means sure that his companions and he could finish the job in time. Fury in him mounted against the self-centered Fane and his inferiority.

"I'll raise the power in my helmet radio and try to contact camp!" Finden said. A moment later he was busy at it:

"CQ—CQ—CQ . . . Calling Survey Camp. Finden speaking. Do you hear me? Fane is responsible for all of our troubles. The attack of the war machines. It is all because he has found a Martian jet-system to make Mercury rotate again. He wants to use it for personal glory. Do you hear me? Fane is guilty."

A sudden realization gripped Rick. He grabbed Finden's shoulders. "Stop!" he snapped. "Stop sending such a message! Don't you see? If Fane overheard . . ."

Both Finden and Lattimer stared at Rick. "What difference does it make who sets Mercury spinning and makes it a useful, habitable world again as long as it's done?" Rick growled. "But if Fane felt that his goose was cooked, he'd wreck the whole works."

Rick gave his own helmet radio full power, and then spoke:

"Fane! I'm calling to you. This is Mills. We've seen what you found. We understand your purpose. It's your discovery, all yours. Come on, make peace. We'll help you put the stuff together."

No one knew how much will it took for Rick to be so unreasonably reasonable.

There was a minute's pause. Then a choked growl of rage. Fane's heavy breathing was audible before his hissing words: "You've talked too much already, smart guys! Tune in on camp and see!"

Rick and the others did so, and heard Nostrand's voice:

"Calling Finden. Your message received. Can you explain further? Camp still under attack."

They switched back to Fane, heard him snarl: "By now Nostrand will have relayed Finden's blabbing to Earth. Any investigation will be much too close. But if I'm finished, so are you. And Nostrand and all the others. Yeah, like Martell and Jacobs. And these jets. I'm playing for keeps, smart guys! If I can't use them, nobody's going to. You'll reach hell before I do."

Young Finden's eyes looked haunted. "Damn me!" he said. "If I'd only kept still."

"Forget it," Rick snapped. "You probably did as right as anybody could. Even if we had patched things up with Fane he probably would have found a way to finish us in the end."

"So let's get to work," Lattimer said briskly.

They examined the parchment plans. They tore through Martian crates and boxes searching for the proper parts. They used tools made for tentacles instead of hands. They toiled like demons. A dream not begun in human minds gripped them. It was only a hope, now, for they were sure that they did not have enough time. Give back a world. Give Mercury a day and night. Spread out the terrible sunlight and darkness. Balance the two to temper each other. Let the frozen air turn to warm wind, and the snow and frost melt. Let the fierce sunlight be filtered by clouds and atmosphere. Let vegetation grow again in tropic lushness. Let the mines be reopened.

And if it was possible, too, let the attack on the camp be lifted, and those still alive there, survive. There was even a wish among these three men that they themselves might not be destroyed.

**A** GAIN Rick Mills had to shove the thought of Anne Munson almost angrily from his mind. It was a mere frivolity, useless and aching in these grim circumstances. A futile wistfulness, worse than the rest.

Time passed. One by one the tasks were finished. Now the men had a Martian generator going, a queer, flat device to produce electric power and to free neutrons from beryllium. Excite neutrons for those great jet tubes.

Could it be believed that at last they had won nineteen hours of toil in their race to finish the job here, before Fane managed to kill them? They had fed huge quantities of familiar powder of uranium into the fuel blowers. They had set cables and grids into place. And still they continued to line things up, getting ready. During all this time there was only ominous, intermittent thudding, as from far away.

"Fane's gathering his robot forces," Finden said anxiously. "And now he can at least tear at the vents of the tubes, up above."

"I hope it won't matter," Rick answered.

They couldn't search out and understand everything that was here. The instruments that might have warned, or the weapons that might have defended them. But optimism came at last. Though it wavered some when they heard a faint grinding sound which seemed deep beyond the walls, but came closer. They hurried to hook up the last cable.

The thing that exploded must have been a mole torpedo that drilled through rock and steel as fast as a man can walk. The walls of this vault did not break fully even under the Titanic force that hit them from outside. They bulged inward. A great section of the roof came down. Two of those huge jets were smashed. The whole chamber seemed to swing like a pendulum. A cable snapped in a flash of electric fire that consumed it.

Rick Mills hardly knew where he was now. He was too stunned. Lattimer was motionless beside him on the floor. Finden crawled on his elbows. Blood dribbled from his mouth. Rick had closed the main switch but the great apparatus here was not functioning. Maybe he dreamed it, but Rick was sure he heard Fane's bitter laugh.

"Just a few minutes more, Mills," he said. "Smart boy! We're all terribly smart, aren't we? We of the Survey Service. Sleep without dreams, Mills! Eternal sleep for fools like you and me!"

This was like the last act with the Martians and Xians. Almost a repetition. These were tortured seconds on which hung the future of Mercury as a Terran colony. Or was that already and badly decided? Must frozen silence and blazing heat continue, here? How many centuries must pass before Terrans would attempt to do for Mercury what the Martians had attempted? Or would they do so, ever? Silence. Silence and death would close in. Fane's robots were certainly aiming more mole torpedoes.

It must not happen like that. Not again. Out of this thought in Rick's mind, an idea was squeezed. It challenged fate. It gave him the muscle power to arise. He staggered

forward and grasped in his metal hands the fire-spitting end of the broken cable. The lining of the gloves was an insulation. He propped himself up with his steel-shod boot on the terminal that the cable was meant to reach. Heat oozed around him as the metal skin of his space suit took the cable's place as an electrical conductor.

Hell broke loose. Rick Mills and his companions felt a thunderous vibration, as of a million space ships blasting off, as all but two of those giant jet-tubes roared into life. Rick had propped himself well. Even when consciousness left him he maintained the electrical contact. Other mole-torpedoes, exploding, shook the chamber and bulged its walls. But the constructive fury that had started there, went on. It wasn't till half an hour later that those great tubes burned out.

No one ever saw the terrible blast of incandescence that they threw into space, like the jet of an old fashioned, Fourth-of-July pinwheel. Not even Fane, out there somewhere in the cold wilderness. Before he could glimpse what was happening, the glare charred his eyeballs. Then it charred him inside his space suit. Then a sea of slush engulfed him and his robots. A slush of liquid air and snow. Steam rose high and

scattered to blank out the stars with an awful wind.

Five hours later the sun that had set here fifty million years ago, rose again. But the melting went on under the veil of fog. And across the furnace desert of Mercury, darkened now at last, rivers roared, hissing. Volcanoes blazed, for how can you cause a world to spin again, without poking up its internal fires with the strain?

But at last the fury of rebirth quieted. And down a murky river days later, a still dazed Rick Mills and his battered companions, paddled a crude metal boat to meet another party from the main camp. The air was thin and steamy, but rich in oxygen, and good to breathe. They had removed their space suit helmets.

Rick took out the picture of Anne Munson. He read the legend scrawled under her pert smile:

*"Find us a world, Rick!"*

"You thought you were pulling my leg, Miss Munson," Rick said solemnly. "But you'll be on Mercury, helping build things up, before you know it. Bet we'll even have a house . . ."

Young Finden's chuckle, and the twinkle in Lattimer's eyes, constituted another kind of leg-pull.

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# THE INFINITES

By PHILIP K. DICK

*Back toward Earth from the radiation-packed asteroid sped the thoroughly transmuted rocket crew . . . to experiment—for better or worse—with their new-found, fabulous million-year knowledge.*

"I DON'T like it," Major Crispin Eller said. He stared through the port scope, frowning. "An asteroid like this with plenty of water, moderate temperature, an atmosphere similar to Terra's oxygen-nitrogen mix—"

"And no life," Harrison Blake, second in command, came up beside Eller. They both stared out. "No life, yet ideal conditions. Air, water, good temperature. Why?"

They looked at each other. Beyond the hull of the cruiser, the X-43y, the barren, level surface of the asteroid stretched away. The X-43y was a long way from home, half-way across the galaxy. Competition with the Mars-Venus-Jupiter Triumvirate had moved Terra to map and prospect every bit of rock in the galaxy, with the idea of claiming mining concessions later on. The X-43y had been out planting the blue and white flag for almost a year. The three-member crew had earned a rest, a vacation back on Terra and a chance to spend the pay they

had accumulated. Tiny prospecting ships led a hazardous life, threading their way through the rubble-strewn periphery of the system, avoiding meteor swarms, clouds of hull-eating bacteria, space pirates, peanut-size empires on remote artificial planetoids—

"Look at it!" Eller said, jabbing angrily at the scope. "Perfect conditions for life. But nothing, just bare rock."

"Maybe it's an accident," Blake said, shrugging.

"You know there's no place where bacteria particles don't drift. There must be some reason why this asteroid isn't fertile. I sense something wrong."

"Well? What do we do?" Blake grinned humorlessly. "You're the captain. According to our instructions we're supposed to land and map every asteroid we encounter over Class-D diameter. This is a Class-C. Are we going outside and map it or not?"

Eller hesitated. "I don't like it. No one knows all the lethal factors floating out here



in deep space. Maybe—"

"Could it be you'd like to go right on back to Terra?" Blake said. "Just think, no one would know we passed this last little bit of rock up. I wouldn't tip them off, Eller."

"That isn't it! I'm concerned with our safety, and that's all. You're the one who's been agitating to turn Terra-side." Eller studied the port scope. "If we only knew."

"Let out the pigs and see what shows. After they've run around for awhile we should know something."

"I'm sorry I even landed."

Blake's face twisted in contempt. "You're sure getting cautious, now that we're almost ready to head home."

Eller moodily watched the gray barren rock, the gently moving water. Water and rock, a few clouds, even temperature. A perfect place for life. But there was no life. The rock was clean, smooth. Absolutely sterile, without growth or cover of any kind. The spectroscope showed nothing, not even one-celled water life, not even the familiar brown lichen encountered on countless rocks strewn through the galaxy.

"All right, then," Eller said. "Open one of the locks. I'll have Silv let out the pigs."

HE PICKED up the com, dialing the laboratory. Down below them in the interior of the ship Silvia Simmons was working, surrounded by retorts and testing apparatus. Eller clicked the switch. "Silv?" he said.

Silvia's features formed on the vidscreen. "Yes?"

"Let the hamsters outside the ship for a short run, about half an hour. With line and collars, of course. I'm worried about this asteroid. There may be some toxic poisons around or radiation pits. When the pigs come back give them a rigid test. Throw the book at them."

"All right, Cris." Silvia smiled. "Maybe we can get out and stretch our legs after awhile."

"Give me the results of the tests as soon as possible." Eller broke the circuit. He turned to Blake. "I assume you're satisfied. In a minute the pigs will be ready to go out."

Blake smiled faintly. I'll be glad when we get back to Terra. One trip with you as

captain is about all I can take."

Eller nodded. "Strange, that thirteen years in the Service hasn't taught you any more self-control. I guess you'll never forgive them for not giving you your stripes."

"Listen, Eller," Blake said. "I'm ten years older than you. I was serving when you were just a kid. You're still a pasty-faced squirt as far as I'm concerned. The next time—"

"CRIS!"

Eller turned quickly. The vidscreen was relit. On it, Silvia's face showed, frantic with fear.

"Yes?" He gripped the com. "What is it?"

"Cris, I went to the cages. The hamsters— They're cataleptic, stretched out, perfectly rigid. Every one of them is immobile. I'm afraid something—"

"Blake, get the ship up," Eller said.

"What?" Blake murmured, confused.

"Are we—"

"Get the ship up! Hurry!" Eller raced toward the controls boards. "We have to get out of here!"

Blake came after him. "Is something—" he began, but abruptly he stopped, choked off. His face glazed over, his jaw slack. Slowly he settled to the smooth metal floor, falling like a limp sack. Eller stared, dazed. At last he broke away and reached toward the controls. All at once a numbing fire seared his skull, bursting inside his head. A thousand shafts of light exploded behind his eyes, blinding him. He staggered, groping for the switches. As darkness plucked at him his fingers closed over the automatic lift.

As he fell he pulled hard. Then the numbing darkness settled over him completely. He did not feel the smashing impact of the floor as it came up at him.

Out into space the ship rose, automatic relays pumping frantically. But inside no one moved.

ELLER opened his eyes. His head throbbed with a deep, aching beat. He struggled to his feet, holding onto the hull railing. Harrison Blake was coming to life also, groaning and trying to rise. His dark face had turned sickly yellow, his eyes were blood-shot, his lips foam-flecked. He stared

at Cris Eller, rubbing his forehead shakily.

"Snap out of it," Eller said, helping him up. Blake sat down in the control chair.

"Thanks." He shook his head. "What—what happened?"

"I don't know. I'm going to the lab and see if Silv is all right."

"Want me to come?" Blake murmured.

"No. Sit still. Don't strain your heart. Do you understand? Move as little as possible."

Blake nodded. Eller walked unsteadily across the control room to the corridor. He entered the drop lift and descended. A moment later he stepped out into the lab.

Silvia was slumped forward at one of the work tables, stiff and unmoving.

"Silv!" Eller ran toward her and caught hold of her, shaking her. Her flesh was hard and cold. "Silv!"

She moved a little.

"Wake up!" Eller got a stimulant tube from the supply cabinet. He broke the tube, holding it by her face. Silvia moaned. He shook her again.

"Cris?" Silvia said faintly. "Is it you? What—what happened? Is everything all right?" She lifted her head, blinking uncertainly. "I was talking to you on the vid-screen. I came over to the table, then all of a sudden—"

"It's all right." Eller frowned, deep in thought, his hand on her shoulder. "What could it have been? Some kind of radiation blast from the asteroid?" He glanced at his wrist watch. "Good Lord!"

"What's wrong?" Silvia sat up, brushing her hair back. "What is it, Cris?"

"We've been unconscious two whole days," Eller said slowly, staring at his watch. He put his hand to his chin. "Well, that explains this." He rubbed at the stubble.

"But we're all right now, aren't we?" Silvia pointed at the hamsters in their cages against the wall. "Look—they're up and running around again."

"Come on." Eller took her hand. "We're going up above and have a conference, the three of us. We're going over every dial and meter reading in the ship. I want to know what happened!"

BLAKE scowled. "I have to agree. I was wrong. We never should have landed."

"Apparently the radiation came from the

center of the asteroid." Eller traced a line on the chart. "This reading shows a wave building up quickly and then dying down. A sort of pulse wave from the asteroid's core, rhythmic."

"If we hadn't got into space we might have been hit by a second wave," Silvia said.

"The instruments picked up a subsequent wave about fourteen hours later. Apparently the asteroid has a mineral deposit that pulses regularly, throwing out radiation at fixed intervals. Notice how short the wave lengths are. Very close to cosmic ray patterns."

"But different enough to penetrate our screen."

"Right. It hit us full force." Eller leaned back in his seat. "That explains why there was no life on the asteroid. Bacteria landing would be withered by the first wave. Nothing would have a chance to get started."

"Cris?" Silvia said.

"Yes?"

"Cris, do you think the radiation might have done anything to us? Are we out of danger? Or—"

"I'm not certain. Look at this." Eller passed her a graph of lined foil, traced in red. "Notice that although our vascular systems have fully recovered, our neural responses are still not quite the same. There's been alteration there."

"In what way?"

"I don't know. I'm not a neurologist. I can see distinct differences from the original tracings, the characteristic test patterns we traced a month or two ago, but what it means I have no way to tell."

"Do you think it's serious?"

"Only time will tell. Our systems were jolted by an intense wave of unclassified radiation for a straight ten hours. What permanent effects it has left, I can't say. I feel all right at this moment. How do you feel?"

"Fine," Silvia said. She looked out through the port scope at the dark emptiness of deep space, at the endless fragments of light arranged in tiny unmoving specks. "Anyhow, we're finally heading Terra-side. I'll be glad to get home. We should have them examine us right away."

"At least our hearts survived without any

obvious damage. No blood clots or cell destruction. That was what I was primarily worried about. Usually a dose of hard radiation of that general type will—"

"How soon will we reach the system?" Blake said.

"A week."

Blake set his lips. "That's a long time. I hope we're still alive."

"I'd advise against exercising too much," Eller said. "We'll take it easy the rest of the way and hope that whatever has been done to us can be undone back on Terra."

"I guess we actually got off fairly easy," Silvia said. She yawned. "Lord, I'm sleepy." She got slowly to her feet, pushing her chair back. "I think I'll turn in. Anyone object?"

"Go ahead," Eller said. "Blake, how about some cards? I want to relax. Black jack?"

"Sure," Blake said. "Why not?" He slid a deck from his jacket pocket. "It'll make the time pass. Cut for deal."

"Fine." Eller took the deck. He cut, showing a seven of clubs. Blake won the deck with a jack of hearts.

They played listlessly, neither of them much interested. Blake was sullen and uncommunicative, still angry because Eller had been proved so right. Eller himself was tired and uncomfortable. His head throbbed dully in spite of the opiates he had taken. He removed his helmet and rubbed his forehead.

"Play," Blake murmured. Under them the jets rumbled, carrying them nearer and nearer Terra. In a week they would enter the system. They had not seen Terra in over a year. How would it look? Would it still be the same? The great green globe, with its vast oceans, all the tiny islands. Then down at New York Spaceport. San Francisco, for him. It would be nice, all right. The crowds of people, Terrans, good old frivolous, senseless Terrans, without a care in the world. Eller grinned up at Blake. His grin turned to a frown.

Blake's head had drooped. His eyes were slowly closing. He was going to sleep.

"Wake up," Eller said. "What's the matter?"

Blake grunted, pulling himself up straight. He went on dealing the next hand. Again his head sank lower and lower.

"Sorry," he murmured. He reached out to draw in his winnings. Eller fumbled in his pocket, getting out more credits. He looked up, starting to speak. But Blake had fallen completely asleep.

"I'll be damned!" Eller got to his feet. "This is strange." Blake's chest rose and fell evenly. He snored a little, his heavy body relaxed. Eller turned down the light and walked toward the door. What was the matter with Blake? It was unlike him to pass out during a game of cards.

ELLER went down the corridor toward his own quarters. He was tired and ready for sleep. He entered his washroom, unfastening his collar. He removed his jacket and turned on the hot water. It would be good to get into bed, to forget everything that had happened to them, the sudden exploding blast of radiation, the painful awakening, the gnawing fear. Eller began to wash his face. Lord, how his head buzzed. Mechanically he splashed water on his arms.

It was not until he had almost finished washing that he noticed it. He stood for a long time, water running over his hands, staring silently down, unable to speak.

His fingernails were gone.

He looked up in the mirror, breathing quickly. Suddenly he grabbed at his hair. Handfuls of hair came out, great bunches of light brown hair. Hair and nails—

He shuddered, trying to calm himself. Hair and nails. Radiation. Of course: radiation did that, killed both the hair and the nails. He examined his hands.

The nails were completely gone all right. There was no trace of them. He turned his hands over and over, studying the fingers. The ends were smooth and tapered. He fought down rising panic, moving unsteadily away from the mirror.

A thought struck him. Was he the only one? What about Silvia!

He put his jacket on again. Without nails his fingers were strangely deft and agile. Could there be anything else? They had to be prepared. He looked into the mirror again.

And sickened.

His head— What was happening? He clasped his hands to his temples. *His head.*

Something was wrong, terribly wrong. He stared, his eyes wide. He was almost completely hairless, now, his shoulders and jacket covered with brown hair that had fallen. His scalp gleamed, bald and pink, a shocking pink. But there was something more.

His head had expanded. It was swelling into a full sphere. And his ears were shriveling, his ears and his nose. His nostrils were becoming thin and transparent even as he watched. He was changing, altering, faster and faster.

He reached a shaking hand into his mouth. His teeth were loose in the gums. He pulled. Several teeth came out easily. What was happening? Was he dying? Was he the only one? What about the others?

Eller turned and hurried out of the room. His breath came painfully, harshly. His chest seemed constricted, his ribs choking the air out of him. His heart labored, beating fitfully. And his legs were weak. He stopped, catching hold of the door. He started into the lift. Suddenly there was a sound, a deep bull roar. Blake's voice, raised in terror and agony.

"That answers that," Eller thought grimly, as the lift rose around him. "At least I'm not the only one!"

**H**ARRISON Blake gaped at him in horror. Eller had to smile. Blake, hairless his skull pink and glistening, was not a very impressive sight. His cranium, too, had enlarged, and his nails were gone. He was standing by the control table, staring first at Eller and then down at his own body. His uniform was too large for his dwindling body. It bagged around him in slack folds.

"Well?" Eller said. "We'll be lucky if we get out of this. Space radiations can do strange things to a man's body. It was a bad day for us when we landed on that—"

"Eller," Blake whispered. "What'll we do? We can't live this way, not like this! Look at us."

"I know." Eller set his lips. He was having trouble speaking now that he was almost toothless. He felt suddenly like a baby. Toothless, without hair, a body growing more helpless each moment. Where would it end?

"We can't go back like this," Blake said.

"We can't go back to Terra, not looking this way. Good heavens, Eller! We're freaks. Mutants. They'll—they'll lock us up like animals in cages. People will—"

"Shut up." Eller crossed to him. "We're lucky to be alive at all. Sit down." He drew a chair out. "I think we better get off our legs."

They both sat down. Blake took a deep, shuddering breath. He rubbed his smooth forehead, again and again.

"It's not us I'm worried about," Eller said, after a time. "It's Silvia. She'll suffer the most from this. I'm trying to decide whether we should go down at all. But if we don't, she may—"

There was a buzz. The vidscreen came to life, showing the white-walled laboratory, the retorts and rows of testing equipment, lined up neatly against the walls.

"Cris?" Silvia's voice came, thin and edged with horror. She was not visible on the screen. Apparently she was standing off to one side.

"Yes." Eller went to the screen. "How are you?"

"How am I?" A thrill of hysteria ran through the girl's voice. "Cris, has it hit you, too? I'm afraid to look." There was a pause. "It has, hasn't it? I can see you—but don't try to look at me. I don't want you to see me again. It's—it's horrible. What are we going to do?"

"I don't know. Blake says he won't go back to Terra this way."

"No! We can't go back! We can't!"

There was silence. "We'll decide later," Eller said finally. "We don't have to settle it now. These changes in our systems are due to radiation, so they may be only temporary. They may go away, in time. Or surgery may help. Anyhow, let's not worry about it now."

"Not worry? No, of course I won't worry. How could I worry about a little thing like this! Cris, don't you understand? We're monsters, hairless monsters. No hair, no teeth, no nails. Our heads—"

"I understand." Eller set his jaw. "You stay down in the lab. Blake and I will discuss it with you on the vidscreen. You won't have to show yourself to us."

Silvia took a deep breath. "Anything you say. You're still captain."

Eller turned away from the screen. "Well, Blake, do you feel well enough to talk?"

The great-domed figure in the corner nodded, the immense hairless skull moving slightly. Blake's once great body had shrunk, caved in. The arms were pipe stems, the chest hollow and sickly. Restlessly, the soft fingers tapped against the table. Eller studied him.

"What is it?" Blake said.

"Nothing. I was just looking at you."

"You're not very pleasant looking, either."

"I realize that." Eller sat down across from him. His heart was pounding, his breath coming shallowly. "Poor Silv! It's worse for her than it is for us."

BLAKE nodded. "Poor Silv. Poor all of us. She's right, Eller. We're monsters." His fragile lips curled. "They'll destroy us back on Terra. Or lock us up. Maybe a quick death would be better. Monsters, freaks, hairless hydrocephalics."

"Not hydrocephalics," Eller said. "Your brain isn't impaired. That's one thing to be thankful for. We can still think. We still have our minds."

"In any case we know why there isn't life on the asteroid," Blake said ironically. "We're a success as a scouting party. We got the information. Radiation, lethal radiation, destructive to organic tissue. Produces mutation and alteration in cell growth as well as changes in the structure and function of the organs."

Eller studied him thoughtfully. "That's quite learned talk for you, Blake."

"It's an accurate description." Blake looked up. "Let's be realistic. We're monstrous cancers blasted by hard radiation. Let's face it. We're not men, not human beings any longer. We're—"

"We're what?"

"I don't know." Blake lapsed into silence.

"It's strange," Eller said. He studied his fingers moodily. He experimented, moving his fingers about. Long, long and thin. He traced the surface of the table with them. The skin was sensitive. He could feel every indentation of the table, every line and mark.

"What are you doing?" Blake said.

"I'm curious." Eller held his fingers close to his eyes, studying them. His eyesight was

dimming. Everything was vague and blurred. Across from him Blake was staring down. Blake's eyes had begun to recede, sinking slowly into the great hairless skull. It came to Eller all at once that they were losing their sight. They were going slowly blind. Panic seized him.

"Blake!" he said. "We're going blind. There's a progressive deterioration of our eyes, vision and muscles."

"I know," Blake said.

"But why? We're actually losing the eyes themselves! They're going away, drying up. Why?"

"Atrophied," Blake murmured.

"Perhaps." Eller brought out a log book from the table, and a writing beam. He traced a few notes on the foil. Sight diminishing, vision failing rapidly. But fingers much more sensitive. Skin response unusual. Compensation?

"What do you think of this?" he said. "We're losing some functions, gaining others."

"In our hands?" Blake studied his own hands. "The loss of the nails makes it possible to use the fingers in new ways." He rubbed his fingers against the cloth of his uniform. "I can feel individual fibers which was impossible before."

"Then the loss of nails was purposeful?"

"So?"

"We've been assuming this was all without purpose. Accidental burns, cell destruction, alteration. I wonder . . ." Eller moved the writing beam slowly across the log sheet. Fingers: new organs of perception. Heightened touch, more tactile response. But vision dimming. . .

"Cris!" Silvia's voice came, sharp and frightened.

"What is it?" He turned toward the vid-screen.

"I'm losing my sight. I can't see."

"It's all right. Don't worry."

"I'm— I'm afraid."

Eller went over to the vidscreen. "Silv, I think we're losing some senses and gaining others. Examine your fingers. Do you notice anything? Touch something."

There was an agonized pause. "I seem to be able to feel things much differently. Not the same as before."

"That's why our nails are gone."

"But what does it mean?"

Eller touched his bulging cranium, exploring the smooth skin thoughtfully. Suddenly he clenched his fists, gasping. "Silv! Can you still operate the X-ray equipment? Are you mobile enough to cross the lab?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Then I want an X-ray plate made. Make it right away. As soon as it's ready notify me."

"An X-ray plate? Of what?"

"Of your own cranium, I want to see what changes our brains have undergone. Especially the cerebrum. I'm beginning to understand, I think."

"What is it?"

"I'll tell you when I see the plate." A faint smile played across Eller's thin lips. "If I'm right, then we've been completely mistaken about what's happened to us!"

FOR a long time Eller stared at the X-ray plate framed in the vidscreen. Dimly he made out the lines of the skull, struggling to see with his fading eyesight. The plate trembled in Silvia's hands.

"What do you see?" she whispered.

"I was right. Blake, look at this, if you can."

Blake came slowly over, supporting himself with one of the chairs. "What is it?" He peered at the plate, blinking. "I can't see well enough."

"The brain has changed enormously. Notice how much enlargement there is here." Eller traced the frontal lobe outline. "Here, and here. There's been growth, amazing growth. And greater convolution. Notice this odd bulge off the frontal lobe. A kind of projection. What do you suppose it might be?"

"I have no idea," Blake said. "Isn't that area mainly concerned with higher processes of thought?"

"The most developed cognitive faculties are located there. And that's where the most growth has taken place." Eller moved slowly away from the screen.

"What do you make of it?" Silvia's voice came.

"I have a theory. It may be wrong, but this fits in perfectly. I thought of it almost at first, when I saw that my nails were gone."

"What's your theory?"

Eller sat down at the control table. "Better get off your feet, Blake. I don't think our hearts are too strong. Our body mass is decreasing, so perhaps later on—"

"Your theory! What is it?" Blake came toward him, his thin bird-like chest rising and falling. He peered down intently at Eller. "What is it?"

"We've evolved," Eller said. "The radiation from the asteroid speeded up cell growth, like cancer. But not without design. There's purpose and direction to these changes, Blake. We're changing rapidly, moving through centuries in a few seconds."

Blake stared at him.

"It's true," Eller said. "I'm sure of it. The enlarged brain, diminished powers of sight, loss of hair, teeth. Increased dexterity and tactile sense. Our bodies have lost, for the most part. But our minds have benefited. We're developing greater cognitive powers, greater conceptual capacity. Our minds are moving ahead into the future. Our minds are evolving."

"Evolving!" Blake sat down slowly. "Can this be true."

"I'm certain of it. We'll take more X-rays, of course. I'm anxious to see changes in the internal organs, kidneys, stomach. I imagine we've lost portions of our—"

"Evolved! But that means that evolution is not the result of accidental external stresses. Competition and struggle. Natural selection, aimless, without direction. It implies that every organism carries the thread of its evolution within it. Then evolution is teleological, with a goal, not determined by chance."

Eller nodded. "Our evolution seems to be more of an internal growth and change along distinct lines. Certainly not random. It would be interesting to know what the directing force is."

"This throws a new light on things," Blake murmured. "Then we're not monsters, after all. We're not monsters. We're—we're men-of the future."

Eller glanced at him. There was a strange quality in Blake's voice. "I suppose you might say that," he admitted. "Of course, we'll still be considered freaks on Terra."

"But they'll be wrong," Blake said. "Yes, they'll look at us and say we're freaks. But



we're not freaks. In another few million years the rest of mankind will catch up to us. We're moving ahead of our own time, Eller."

Eller studied Blake's great bulging head. He could only dimly make out its lines. Already, the well-lighted control room was turning almost dark. Their sight was virtually gone. All he could make out was vague shadows, nothing more.

"Men of the future," Blake said. "Not monsters, but men from tomorrow. Yes, this certainly throws a new light on things." He laughed nervously. "A few minutes ago I was ashamed of my new appearance! But now—"

"But now what?"

"But now I'm not so sure."

"What do you mean?"

Blake did not answer. He had got slowly to his feet, holding onto the table.

"Where are you going?" Eller said.

BLAKE crossed the control room painfully, feeling his way toward the door. "I must think this over. There are astonishing new elements to be considered. I agree, Eller. You're quite right. We have evolved. Our cognitive faculties are greatly improved. There's considerable deterioration in body functions, of course. But that's to be expected. I think we're actually the gainers, everything considered." Blake touched his great skull cautiously. "Yes, I think that in the long run we may have gained. We will look back on this as a great day, Eller. A great day in our lives. I'm sure your theory is correct. As the process continues I can sense changes in my conceptual abilities. The Gestalt faculty has risen amazingly. I can intuit certain relationships that—"

"Stop!" Eller said. "Where are you going? Answer me. I'm still captain of this ship."

"Going? I'm going to my quarters. I must rest. This body is highly inadequate. It may be necessary to devise mobile carts and perhaps even artificial organs as mechanical lungs and hearts. I'm certain the pulmonary and vascular systems are not going to stand up long. The life expectancy is no doubt greatly diminished. I'll see you later, Major Eller. But perhaps I should not use the

word *see*." He smiled faintly. "We will not see much any more." He raised his hands. "But *these* will take the place of vision." He touched his skull. "And *this* will take the place of many, many things."

He disappeared, closing the door behind him. Eller heard him going slowly, determinedly down the corridor, feeling his way along with careful, feeble steps.

Eller crossed to the vidscreen. "Silv! Can you hear me? Did you listen to our conversation?"

"Yes."

"Then you know what has happened to us."

"Yes, I know. Cris, I'm almost completely blind now. I can see virtually nothing."

Eller grimaced, remembering Silvia's keen, sparkling eyes. "I'm sorry, Silv. I wish this had never happened. I wish we were back the way we were. It's not worth it."

"Blake thinks it's worth it."

"I know. Listen, Silv. I want you to come here to the control room, if you can. I'm worried about Blake, and I want you here with me."

"Worried? How?"

"He's got something on his mind. He's not going to his quarters merely to rest. Come here with me and we'll decide what to do. A few minutes ago I was the one who said we should go back to Terra. But now I think I'm beginning to change my mind."

"Why? Because of Blake? You don't suppose Blake would—"

"I'll discuss it with you when you get here. Make your way along with your hands. Blake did it, so probably you can. I think perhaps we won't return to Terra after all. But I want to give you my reasons."

"I'll be there as soon as I can," Silvia said. "But be patient. And Cris— Don't look at me. I don't want you to see me this way."

"I won't see you," Eller said grimly. "By the time you get here I won't be able to see much at all."

SILVIA sat down at the control table. She had put on one of the spacesuits from the lab locker so that her body was hidden by the plastic and metal suit. Eller waited until she had caught her breath.

"Go on," Silvia said.

"The first thing we must do is collect all the weapons on the ship. When Blake comes back I'm going to announce that we are not returning to Terra. I think he will be angry, perhaps enough to start trouble. If I'm not mistaken, he very much wants to keep moving Terra-side now, as he begins to understand the implications of our change."

"And you don't want to go back."

"No." Eller shook his head. "We must not go back to Terra. There's danger, great danger. You can see what kind of danger already."

"Blake is fascinated by the new possibilities," Silvia said thoughtfully. "We're ahead of other men, several millions of years, advancing each moment. Our brains, our powers of thought, are far in advance of other Terrans."

"Blake will want to go back to Terra, not as an ordinary man, but as a man of the future. We may find ourselves in relation to other Terrans as geniuses among idiots. If the process of change keeps up, we may find them nothing more than higher primates, animals in comparison to us."

They both were silent.

"If we go back to Terra we'll find human beings nothing more than animals," Eller went on. "Under the circumstances, what would be more natural than for us to help them? After all, we're millions of years ahead of them. We could do a lot for them if they'd let us direct them, lead them, do their planning for them."

"And if they resist we probably could find ways of gaining control of them," Silvia said. "And everything, of course, would be for their own good. That goes without saying. You're right, Kris. If we go back to Terra we'll soon find ourselves contemptuous of mankind. We'll want to lead them, show them how to live, whether they want us to or not. Yes, it'll be a strong temptation."

Eller got to his feet. He went over to the weapons locker and opened it. Carefully, he removed the heavy-duty Boris guns and brought them over to the table, one by one.

"The first thing is to destroy these. After that, you and I have to see to it that Blake is kept away from the control room. Even if we have to barricade ourselves in, it has

to be done. I'll reroute the ship. We'll move away from the system, toward some remote region. It's the only way."

He opened the Boris guns and removed the firing controls. One by one he broke the controls, crunching them under foot.

There was a sound. Both turned, straining to see.

"Blake!" Eller said. "It must be you. I can't see you, but—"

"You're correct," Blake's voice came. "No, Eller, we're all of us blind, or almost blind. So you destroyed the Boris guns! I'm afraid that won't keep us from returning to Terra."

"Go back to your quarters," Eller said. "I'm the captain, and I'm giving you an order to—"

Blake laughed. "You're ordering me? You're almost blind, Eller, but I think you'll be able to see—this!"

Something rose up into the air around Blake, a soft pale cloud of blue. Eller gasped, cringing, as the cloud swirled around him. He seemed to be dissolving, breaking into countless fragments, rushed and carried away, drifting—

Blake withdrew the cloud into the tiny disc that he held. "If you'll remember," he said calmly, "I received the *first* bath of radiation. I'm a little ahead of you two, by only a short time, perhaps, but enough. In any case, the Boris guns would have been useless, compared to what I have. Remember, everything in this ship is a million years antiquated. What I hold—"

"Where did you get it, that disc?"

"I GOT it nowhere. I constructed it, as soon as I realized that you would turn the ship away from Terra. I found it easy to make. In a short time the two of you will also begin to realize our new powers. But right now, I'm afraid, you're just a bit behind."

Eller and Silvia struggled to breathe. Eller sank against the hull railing, exhausted, his heart laboring. He stared at the disc in Blake's hand.

"We'll continue moving toward Terra," Blake went on. "Neither of you is going to change the control settings. By the time we arrive at the New York Spaceport you both will have come to see things differently.

When you've caught up with me you'll see things as I see them. We must go back, Eller. It's our duty to mankind."

"Our duty?"

There was a faint mocking quality in Blake's voice. "Of course it's our duty! Mankind needs us. It needs us very much. There's much we can do for Terra. You see, I was able to catch some of your thoughts. Not all of them, but enough to know what you were planning. You'll find that from now on we'll begin to lose speech as a method of communication. We'll soon begin to rely directly on—"

"If you can see into my mind then you can see why we mustn't return to Terra," Eller said.

"I can see what you're thinking but you're wrong. We must go back for their good." Blake laughed softly. "We can do a lot for them. Their science will change in our hands. They will change, altered by us. We'll remake Terra, make her strong. The Triumvirate will be helpless before the new Terra, the Terra that we will build. The three of us will transform the race, make it rise, burst across the entire galaxy. Mankind will be material for us to mold. The blue and white will be planted everywhere, on all the planets of the galaxy, not on mere bits of rock. We'll make Terra strong, Eller. Terra will rule everywhere."

"So that's what you have in mind," Eller said. "And if Terra doesn't want to go along with us? What then?"

"It is possible they won't understand," Blake admitted. "After all, we must begin to realize that we're millions of years ahead of them. They're a long way behind us, and many times they may not understand the purpose of our orders. But you know that orders must be carried out, even if their meaning is not comprehended. You've commanded ships, you know that. For Terra's own good, and for—"

Eller leaped. But the fragile, brittle body betrayed him. He fell short, grasping frantically, blindly, for Blake. Blake cursed, stepping back.

"You fool! Don't you—"

The disc glinted, the blue cloud bursting into Eller's face. He staggered to one side, his hands up. Abruptly he fell, crashing to the metal floor. Silvia lumbered to her

feet, coming toward Blake, slow and awkward in the heavy spacesuit. Blake turned toward her, the disc raised. A second cloud rose up. Silvia screamed. The cloud devoured her.

"Blake!" Eller struggled to his knees. The tottering figure that had been Silvia lurched and fell. Eller caught hold of Blake's arms. The two figures swayed back and forth, Blake trying to pull away. Suddenly Eller's strength gave out. He slipped back down, his head striking the metal floor. Nearby, Silvia lay, silent and inert.

"Get away from me," Blake snarled, waving the disc. "I can destroy you the way I did her. Do you understand?"

"You killed her," Eller screamed.

"It's your own fault. You see what you gained by fighting? Stay away from me! If you come near me I'll turn the cloud on you again. It'll be the end of you."

Eller did not move. He stared at the silent form.

"All right," Blake's voice came to him, as if from a great distance. "Now listen to me. We're continuing toward Terra. You'll guide the ship for me while I work down in the laboratory. I can follow your thoughts, so if you attempt to change course I'll know at once. Forget about her! It still leaves two of us, enough to do what we must. We'll be within the system in a few days. There's much to accomplish, first." Blake's voice was calm, matter of fact. "Can you get up?"

Eller rose slowly, holding onto the hull railing.

"Good," Blake said. "We must work everything out very carefully. We may have difficulties with the Terrans at first. We must be prepared for that. I think that in the time remaining I will be able to construct the necessary equipment that we will need. Later on, when your development catches up with my own, we will be able to work together to produce the things we need."

ELLER stared at him. "Do you think I'll ever go along with you?" he said. His glance moved toward the figure on the floor, the silent, unmoving figure. "Do you think after that I could ever—"

"Come, come, Eller," Blake said impatiently. "I'm surprised at you. You must begin to see things from a new position.

There is too much involved to consider—"

"So this is how mankind will be treated! This is the way you'll save them, by ways like this!"

"You'll come around to a realistic attitude," Blake said calmly. "You'll see that as men of the future—"

"Do you really think I will?"

The two men faced each other.

Slowly a flicker of doubt passed over Blake's face. "You must, Eller! It's our duty to consider things in a new way. Of course you will." He frowned, raising the disc a little. "How can there be any doubt of that?"

Eller did not answer.

"Perhaps," Blake said thoughtfully, "you will hold a grudge against me. Perhaps your vision will be clouded by this incident. It is possible . . ." The disc moved. "In that case I must adjust myself as soon as possible to the realization that I will have to go on alone. If you won't join with me to do the things that must be done then I will have to do them without you." His fingers tightened against the disc. "I will do it all alone, Eller, if you won't join me. Perhaps this is the best way. Sooner or later this moment might come, in any case. It is better for me to—"

Blake screamed.

From the wall a vast, transparent shape moved slowly, almost leisurely, out into the control room. Behind the shape came another, and then another, until at last there were five of them. The shapes pulsed faintly, glimmering with a vague, internal glow. All were identical, featureless.

In the center of the control room the shapes came to rest, hovering a little way up from the floor, soundlessly, pulsing gently, as if waiting.

Eller stared at them. Blake had lowered his disc and was standing, pale and tense, gaping in astonishment. Suddenly Eller realized something that made chill fear rush through him. He was not seeing the shapes at all. He was almost completely blind. He was sensing them in some new way, through some new mode of perception. He struggled to comprehend, his mind racing. Then, all at once, he understood. And he knew why they had no distinct shapes, no features.

They were pure energy.

Blake pulled himself together, coming to

life. "What—" he stammered, waving the disc. "Who—"

A thought flashed, cutting Blake off. The thought seared through Eller's mind, hard and sharp, a cold, impersonal thought, detached and remote.

"The girl. First."

Two of the shapes moved toward Silvia's inert form, lying silently extended beside Eller. They paused a slight distance above her, glowing and pulsing. Then part of the glimmering corona leaped out, hurtling toward the girl's body, bathing her in a shimmering fire.

"That will suffice," a second thought came, after a few moments. The corona retreated. "Now, the one with the weapon."

A shape moved toward Blake. Blake retreated toward the door behind him. His withered body shook with fear.

"What are you?" he demanded, raising the disc. "Who are you? Where did you come from?"

The shape came on.

"Get away!" Blake cried. "Get back! If you don't—"

He fired. The blue cloud entered the shape. The shape quivered for a moment, absorbing the cloud. Then it came on again. Blake's jaw fell. He scrambled into the corridor, stumbling and falling. The shape hesitated at the door. Then it was joined by a second shape which moved up beside it.

A BALL of light left the first shape, moving toward Blake. It enveloped him. The light winked out. There was nothing where Blake had stood. Nothing at all.

"That was unfortunate," a thought came.

"But necessary. Is the girl reviving?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"Who are you?" Eller asked. "What are you? Will Silv be all right? Is she alive?"

"The girl will recover." The shapes moved toward Eller, surrounding him. "We should perhaps have intervened before she was injured but we preferred to wait until we were certain the one with the weapon was going to gain control."

"Then you knew what was happening?"

"We saw it all."

"Who are you? Where did you—where did you come from?"

"We were here," the thought came.  
"Here?"

"On the ship. We were here from the start. You see, *we* were the first to receive the radiation; Blake was wrong. So our transformation began even before his did. And in addition, we had much farther to go. Your race has little evolution ahead of it. A few more inches of cranium, a little less hair, perhaps. But not really so much. Our race, on the other hand, had just begun."

"Your race? First to receive the radiation?" Eller stared around him in dawning realization. "Then you must be—"

"Yes," the calm, inflexible thought came. "You are right. We are the hamsters from the laboratory. The pigs carried for your experiments and tests." There was almost a note of humor in the thought. "However, we hold nothing against you, I assure you. In fact, we have very little interest in your race, one way or another. We owe you a slight debt for helping us along our path, bringing our destiny onto us in a few short minutes instead of another fifty million years."

"For that we are thankful. And I think we have already repaid you. The girl will be all right. Blake is gone. You will be allowed to continue on your way back to your own planet."

"Back to Terra?" Eller frowned. "But—"

"There is one more thing that we will do before we go," the calm thought came. "We have discussed the matter and we are in complete agreement on this. Eventually your race will achieve its rightful position through the natural course of time. There is no value in hurrying it prematurely. For the sake of your race and the sake of you two,

we will do one last thing before we depart. You will understand."

A swift ball of flame rose from the first shape. It hovered over Eller. It touched him and passed on to Silvia. "It is better," the thought came. "There is no doubt."

They watched silently, staring through the port scope. From the side of the ship the first ball of light moved, flashing out into the void.

"Look!" Silvia exclaimed.

The ball of light increased speed. It shot away from the ship, moving at incredible velocity. A second ball oozed through the hull of the ship, out into space behind the first.

After it came a third, a fourth, and finally a fifth. One by one the balls of light hurtled out into the void, out into deep space.

When they were gone Silvia turned to Eller, her eyes shining. "That's that," she said. "Where are they going?"

"No way to tell. A long way, probably. Maybe not anywhere in this galaxy. Some remote place." Eller reached out suddenly, touching Silvia's dark-brown hair. He grinned. "You know, your hair is really something to see. The most beautiful hair in the whole universe."

Silvia laughed. "Any hair looks good to us, now." She smiled up at him, her red lips warm. "Even yours, Cris."

Eller gazed down at her a long time. "They were right," he said at last.

"Right?"

"It *is* better." Eller nodded, gazing down at the girl beside him, at her hair and dark eyes, the familiar lithe, supple form. "I agree— There is no doubt of it."

# COSMIC CASTAWAY

By STANLEY MULLEN

*"You aren't human, Bell. And you're not a robot. What are you?" Bell pondered the query slowly, cautiously, with his semi-mechanical superbrain . . . a brain that Plutonians dubbed the most deadly and dangerous in the universe.*

ATMOSPHERE in the ticket agent's office seemed thicker and warmer than usual, but the disturbing factors were supercharged emotions, not jammed pressure-gauges or thermal adjusters. Not all the emotions were human; but they were real enough, both to Bell and to the ticket agent.

"I know all about you, Bell," the agent said, looking over the half-man curiously, with a hint of vicious resentment. Like many minor functionaries, the ticket agent took the troubles of his employers personally, and Mines, Inc. on Pluto was a subsidiary of the Power and Transport Trust. "Sure, you think you have return passage coming to you. Hasn't the company been more than generous? Actually, it must have cost a fortune to patch you up."

"It did," Bell admitted. "But that's not the problem. I'm not claiming free passage. I have money to pay."

Bell was half-man, half-robot, the result of one of those hideous accidents never mentioned in the Company's much-vaunted Public Reports. Technologically, even aesthetically, he was a work of art, but his own mother would not have known him. Item by item, his appearance was curiously humanoid, but no elasticity of definition could make him human. Every vital organ was partly or wholly artificial, 64% of his body being either reclaimed or synthetic tissue. The face was a mask of stainless steel, washed to flesh color by aluminum bronze tinted toward copper, and the brain behind it was not the one he was born with.

Closing his ledger with a bang the agent snorted. "So what? I don't care if you own half of Pluto. You're still out of luck for

passage home. We're booked solid . . . six months ahead."

"You're a liar," Bell stated flatly, "and even if you were a good one, I know better. There've been four cancellations by miners who couldn't pass physical for space. What's the gas?"

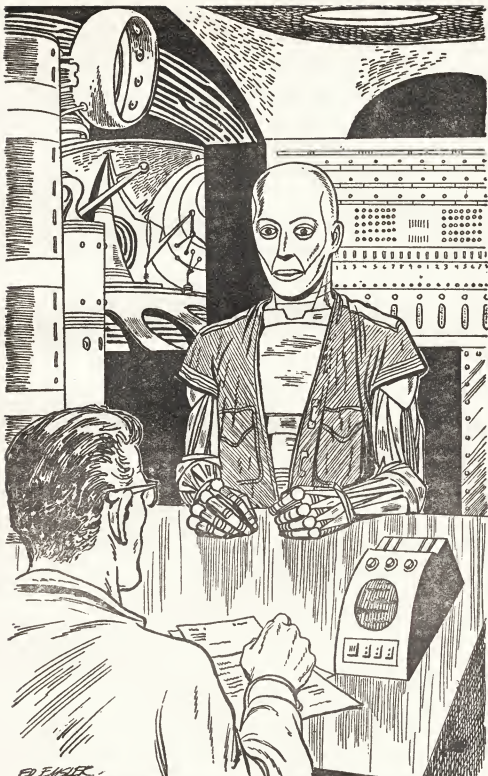
Underground Pluto is an interesting place, but it would be pleasant only for a race of troglodytes. Heated and pressurized air is uncomfortably dense; light is artificial and there is a sense of constant vibration from distant atomic boring. No one ever quite gets used to the endless maze of galleries in subsurface cities, or to the jarring quiver of vibrations in octaves above and below audible sound. Worst of all is the deadly isolation from civilized mankind, and even hardy miners accustomed to the black pits of Luna and Ganymede require weeks of readjustment before they can work. For himself, Bell had never objected to the working and living conditions, but he no longer worked, and Pluto was no place to spend his life.

"Are you sure you could pass the physical?" The ticket agent shrugged. "Don't bother me about it." With a type of insolence not uncommon in his breed, he attempted to turn away. Bell reached, got the man's collar into a strangling tourniquet around his throat. Pawing frantically, the agent tried to release himself but Bell applied force and waited until the plump face purpled artistically.

"Now that we understand each other, do I get my ticket?" Bell demanded without heat, easing pressure to permit reply.

"No!" gasped his victim, signalling wildly as the pressure of twisted cloth tightened





*Like many minor functionaries the ticket agent studied the half-man with a hint of vicious resentment.*

again. "Wait! I can't sell you a ticket. Even if I did, no space-skipper would dare honor it. We have orders. You aren't going back to Earth, Bell. You can't go anywhere! . . ."

Bell dropped his prey as a terrier discards a dead rat.

"Why not? Orders from whom?"

Glaring, warily resentful, the clerk spat an unprintable reply. "I wouldn't know," he added. Then anticipating further violence of discussion, he dived into a fat sheaf of papers and came up waving a red flimsy. "Go on. Read it yourself. No ticket for you, now or ever. Nobody tells me why. If anyone had, I wouldn't tell you. Try the Psycho Lab. That's where the order came from. Maybe they'll give you a reason. Maybe they'll explain. I hope they do—"

There was no good will in the expression that followed Bell from the ticket office.

HASTINGS, in Psycho, dreaded the interview with Bell. He was warned by the visi-screen that Bell was on his way, so he braced himself and wondered how best to word an explanation that would not explain. A buzzer sounded and Hastings pressed the button-release to admit Bell to the office.

It was impossible not to stare. Hastings wanted to be kind. As a scientist he was naturally interested; as a man he recognized tragedy. Hastings did Bell the courtesy of not attempting to hide his curiosity.

From a distance, or to casual observation, illusion was both startling and complete. No functional flaws had shown up under the most exhaustive tests. Eyes looked like eyes, facial planes bore remarkable resemblance to human features, new limbs and extremities looked and worked at least as well as the originals. Design and workmanship was skillful enough to fool a layman, though a specialist might catch minute, observable differences, especially in the smooth flow of motor impulses. Synthetic muscles responded swiftly and in completed curves, rather than in the stiff, jointed, jerky effects of human locomotion. Walking became a sinuous, liquid glide; there was superhuman precision, and a sense of restrained power and agility beyond the human norm.

Bell stopped before the doctor's desk. Even the gesture of instantaneous repose jarred slightly, with its hint of high-order efficiency awaiting stimuli. Hastings catalogued Bell's visible features, and memory supplied a working picture of the rest. For an icy moment Hastings was gripped by the craftsman's awareness of his own work as a masterpiece, but in the tragic motif.

Bell laughed, the sound flat and metallic, but not unpleasant. "Take a good look, doc. I know how you feel. When I get up in the morning I always wonder if I need a shave. It's still a shock to look in a mirror. It's not shaving I miss, but not having to gripe about it jars me."

"Is it as bad as that?" Hastings asked sympathetically.

"Bad enough."

In a basically imperfect world, there are various kinds and degrees of greatness. Interviewing Bell was not Hastings' job or even moral obligation. Explanation would be difficult, probably impossible. Hastings officiated at his own request.

"You know why I'm here," Bell went on. The robot voice held curious overtones, not harshly metallic, but murmurous like an echo of low-tuned bells. "I want to go home. Back to Earth. I have a wife there. While I had a real job here it was all right, but I've been relieved since the accident. My contract is voided, they tell me. I could sign another contract but I didn't like the fine print. It said PERMANENT. No contract, no job, nor reason to stay. Now I'd like some straight answers."

Hastings sighed. His alert ears caught belligerence in the tone as well as the words.

"They refused your ticket?"

Bell nodded quickly. Light glanced from the rounded angles of his face-plate. "Right on the nose. No mistake, either. Orders. From here. Do I get my answers from you or wait until somebody slips? There could be a good reason. If so, I have a right to know about it."

"You do, Bell," Hastings admitted. He hesitated. "I had hoped this wouldn't come up just yet. What's deadly important about going back to Earth? Anything immediate? Your contract still had three years to run . . . before the accident."

Bell glanced swiftly around the office, eyeplates questing for concealed microphones, alarm scanners. Attention settled back upon Hastings, the plates fixed with mechanical intentness. The man-robot was shrewd, intelligent, possessed of odd quirks of humor and wayward caprices of thought beyond that of either electronic or human brains. A new and oddly terrifying factor had entered the equation of man versus machine.

"Before the accident," Bell chimed in. The incomplete thought seemed to satisfy him. "I have two good reasons. First, my wife. Second, I want to get back among normal people and learn what kind of adjustments I will have to make. I still have my life to live somewhere. This is not the place."

"Straight answers, both of them," Hastings said. "Now I'll try to answer your questions. I'd rather give you arguments first, then the answers. Simple answers are rarely as simple as they seem. You had a wife, Bell. She hasn't seen you. She doesn't know what has happened. In words, perhaps. She knows you were hurt and that drastic repairs were made. Can you expect her to visualize you, as you are now? Be honest with her, Bell. Get a divorce, or ask her to get one. You aren't the man she married. Legally, you may have a touchy point to argue, but legally or not, you aren't married to the woman. It's the kindest way, believe me. That's professional advice from a doctor. A lawyer would tell you the same."

"I'd rather she told me," Bell protested.

"All right. About the other item. Getting to know people and learning what adjustments you must make to live among them. Forget it. You aren't going back, Bell. Not now and maybe never."

BELL took the blow without a quiver. Hastings would have given much for any hint of reaction but dealing with a metal mask and translucent eyeplates put him at a disadvantage.

"We'll go into that later," Bell said. "I'm not convinced, but we'll waive discussion of that point. Your statements lead back to the jackpot question: What's wrong with me?"

"Does something have to be wrong with you?" The answer came too quickly, as if Hastings had readied the parry in advance.

"I don't know of anything. Do you, doc? Don't fence with me. There has to be something wrong with me. Otherwise I'd be on the Earth-Express ship briefing for space right now. I'll ask you once more, doc. Do you know something about me that I don't? What is wrong with me?"

Hastings dived reluctantly into the icy waters. "All right, Bell. But remember you asked for this. I know of nothing wrong with you. Any tests we could devise showed you without mechanical flaws. Except for a few minor irregularities that will straighten out under normal conditions, you are perfect. Your body is the best Lavery ever turned out, and the only parts he won't vouch for are those you were born with. Your brain is good, I think. I should know since I designed it. The trouble is: I don't know. What I think and hope is not evidence. Neither are our tests, for we have no yardstick to judge you by. You aren't human, Bell. And you aren't a robot. What are you?"

Bell reacted suddenly, in a manner that caused Hastings a bad moment. The chuckle was like bearings rattling in a loose casing.

"Since you designed my brain, I have a complaint for you, doc. You did too good a job, if that's an objection."

"I don't follow you."

"Let's face it. I'm not exotic enough. Neither man nor robot, as you point out. I look different to myself and feel different up to a point.

"But I don't feel different enough. Like shaving. Why do I worry about it? It's past, no longer a function. And it's only, one item. I have all the same old habits and confusions, same old fears and maladjustments. Even the same loves and hatreds. There are some too silly to mention, and others vital. A few are fading, but others are part of my daily ritual. Why should the gadgets you and Lavery fudged up to replace my burned parts still fly off on the same old tangents?"

Hastings groaned. "I don't know, Bell. That's the terrible part of this whole business. The brain, human or robot, cannot be wholly charted or pigeonholed. The robots have built-in stops to short-circuit dangerous

electronic relays. But the synthetic or re-claimed tissue is a different story. There are no stops. None of us can predict what will go on in your brain. It is partly original tissue, partly something utterly unknown and challenging. It may be the most deadly and dangerous combination in our universe. You don't know yourself, Bell. And we don't know you. We can't take the risk of sending you back to Earth. Not till we know. If we ever do."

"Go on," urged Bell flatly.

"That is only half the problem. Here society is restricted. We are all used to an unreal and largely artificial environment. We are carefully selected and screened by hypnotic machines and the Psychographs. Even here life will be difficult enough for you. On Earth it is probably impossible. We are not half as worried by your possible reactions to humanity as we are by their reactions to you. They will fear and resent you. Doubtless you have been aware that something of the sort goes on even here. People fear you.

"Either man or robot can be described in familiar terms. We are accustomed to both and understand the functions of either. But you are something new. Totally different. Unpredictable, terribly unfamiliar, possibly a serious menace. You are disturbed by memory and habit patterns. These will alter gradually as you overlay the old patterns with new ones, new memories, instincts and habit impulses. We can't replace intangibles. The old groove helps you for a time but you'll outgrow it. And the new grooves may take curious directions before you're through. You may even be immortal."

Synthetic flesh puckered Bell's mouth into a curious effect as if his emotions caricatured a human grin.

"So I am the jackpot question?" he queried. "I expected such outlandish ideas from my second-hand thinkbox but you've really pulled up a dilly. What happens if I don't accept your fantastic diagnosis? Suppose I go back to Earth anyhow?"

Hastings shrugged. "I hoped you were too intelligent to insist, Bell. The people on Earth aren't prepared for you. There were other experiments, you know. Previous attempts to reconstruct a functioning being from damaged and spare parts. Their history

makes it tougher for you. They were failures but pretty hard on mankind. Some went insane. Most of them destroyed themselves. Potentially your brain is a superbrain. You're the first successful experiment. But you're new in the saddle and it's a mighty strange horse. You could trample a lot of innocent people, get thrown and perhaps badly hurt yourself. People will make it difficult enough for you here. Don't push your luck."

"I've listened," said Bell oddly. "I believe you're reasonably honest. But there's something you haven't told me. What is it?"

Hastings shook his head. "I wanted to make this easy for you, Bell. I asked for your interview. I was curious, true. Not only in the scientific sense but snoop-curious, human-curious. That's the decent motive, curiosity combined with a desire to help. But there was another reason. You'll run into it from here on so I'll tell you straight: I'm afraid of you. Not just your interesting possibilities. I'm afraid of what you are now. You're different, you and I are civilized enough to know and accept it. But even we don't dare face how different. My chief emotion toward you is panic terror. Just how do you think other people will feel?"

"I don't have to guess," Bell admitted. "I'm wondering how my wife will feel. You're afraid of what you don't see in me. And I'm afraid of what I will see in her. But I have to see it myself. I still want to go home."

Hastings' gesture was hopeless. "And you won't be satisfied till you have a try at stowing away on the spaceship? Is that it?"

Bell refused audible comment. Hastings made a last try. "You can't do it, Bell. Ticket or no ticket. No captain or crew would dare trust you on a spaceship. Try it if you must. But don't hurt anyone. You know what that would mean."

Bell's reply was a mechanical grating. "I want people to like me. I don't want to hurt them. I'm not convinced but I'll think it over . . ."

"Be sure, Bell."

"I will be. But I haven't decided yet . . ." In silent glide, the man-robot was gone. Half an hour later, alarms blared . . .

**F**ROWNING, Hastings dialed security police headquarters. Yes, an alarm had come in. Yes, from Spaceport No. 4. But it was only a headfire temporarily out of hand; the jetmen were clearing a fused jet in the booster rockets, a reserve fuel bin ignited.

A blunt, reassuringly human face grinned from the visiscreen.

"Stop worrying, Hastings. Two men are watching Bell every minute. There's no chance of his getting aboardship. Only one spacer in the cradles at the moment: 11-9334. That's the ship he expected to take but there's not a chance for him. Passengers are all checked aboard, briefed for space and put to bed. However, if you'll feel any better about it, go over and recheck. If you've any doubts I'll put through emergency priority and you can go along with the ship to Earth. The staff here can take care of Bell and destroy him if necessary. Yes, I know the Company wants us to take no chance with him. Seems a waste after all the trouble you took putting him back together, but nobody argues with the Company."

Hastings shrugged unhappily. No, nobody ever argued with the Company. Regretfully he punched keys and Bell's card snapped from the electronically coded files. He stamped it with the properly impregnated ink and fed the pasteboard into a pneumatic chute.

"Better pick him up for protective custody," he said. "I've put the order through. Don't take chances with him but try to avoid rough stuff unless he forces it. You'd better get clearance from the population board if you do destroy him. I'm not sure the Company has authority for that. After all, he's not a beast."

"What is he, then?" The blunt face laughed unpleasantly.

"I don't know. My nerves are like fiddle strings and my leave's overdue. Clear my passage and I'll go along . . . just in case."

Hastings reached Space Terminal No. 4 just after the police alarms went into convulsions. He checked with headquarters and the news was not reassuring. Bell had been picked up, asked to come along for questioning and agreed whimsically. Somewhere en route he had simply vanished, which is

not as simple as it sounds in security arrest. Baffled police and company guards were still searching and a cordon had been thrown around the terminal area. It took a special order to pass Hastings through.

Escape from Pluto is a practical impossibility; a man would be mad to attempt the gamble. But Bell was not a man. The cargo holds were airless and scarcely insulated against the temperatures of space. Leakage from atomic fuel batteries was possible. Crew and passenger accommodations were so limited that scarcely a mouse could find hiding place. Rigorous inspection at the airlocks and hatches offered a problem beyond the powers of a magician, even a real one, not a mere trick artist.

Time passed and Bell did not appear near the spaceport. No attempt was made to crash through the cordon of guards. Nerves grew strained and the approaching deadline forced decision on Hastings. He dialed headquarters.

"I'm going with the ship," he told embarrassed officialdom. "If Bell is aboard, I'd better be along. Someone who understands the situation."

Officialdom nodded, no longer amused by the threat of Bell.

"Tell the captain to take no chances with him . . ."

Hastings shrugged unhappily.

Take-off was unspectacular. Pluto is a freak planet of nearly Earth-size, but denser, and with the standard peculiarities of the outer planets. Gravity provides additional problems of reaching escape velocity, but these are not complicated by atmospheric friction. All gases, even the lightest, are liquid or solid, and concentrated in thin layers on the surface.

A booster sequence of ring magnets operated automatically to raise the ship from the subsurface spaceport and catapult it past the planetary skin. Leaving the tube like a projectile, the spacer was carried beyond the immediate field of Plutonian gravity by triple-stage rockets which cut loose and dropped back to the surface for pickup. Afterward, orbit was trimmed just as for a free-flight to Earth, but the ship itself put in readiness for the hyperdimensional drive. Such immense distances are involved that no free-flight nor even steady-power atomic

propulsion could solve the problem satisfactorily. Time and money are important outside Buddhist monasteries.

During most of the month-long journey from Pluto all occupants of the spaceship are either blacked-out from acceleration or existing in the dream-world of hyperdimensions. Building to the extremes of velocity required for the hyperdimensional translation is painful, dreary and dangerous. Once terminal velocity is reached and translation occurs, normal space is warped into a tight elliptical cocoon around the ship, all inertial forces partially damped out, and drugs or mechanical trickery must be resorted to while human minds skirt the dark, ravelled edges of the Unknown.

In that eerie, hour-long interval between primary acceleration and the prolonged nightmare of the pocket universe, Hastings and two crewmen turned out the living quarters and all accessible holds of the ship. Even the outer cargo holds were examined by scanner and it was obvious that Bell was not hiding out aboard. Rows of neatly racked crates, parcels, bins of ore, mail cans, and semi-activated fuel left neither space nor safety for a stowaway. All passengers and crewmen were double checked by the officers and by Hastings.

Afterwards, while alarm howlers vibrated hideously through the cabin-decks, service passageways and control rooms, Hastings lowered himself into the shock-block of moulded plastic and tried to relax.

The process was one familiar to him from previous voyages to and from Pluto. Subconsciously he was aware of sound and movement about him but it was fading rapidly. From here on every internal function of the ship, even to the care and feeding of its human element, would perforce be relegated to robots and the automatic machinery. Grimly, Hastings recalled one part-machine . . .

Machines . . .

**Q**UIVERING grayness surrounded him, claimed him as its own. A hard, bright core of identity remained alive, but the immaterial suspension of grayness seemed of infinite extension in all dimensions of time and space. Time perception and space perception meant little in themselves, be-

came mere illusions which would pass away for a time and then return painfully. There had been few accidents, Hastings remembered, and he clung desperately to this last fading memory of consciousness.

Coming out was not necessarily as painful as rebirth but it could have awkward moments. Needle-bite was not the worst, and the tingling frost-fires spread through veins and nerves communicating Inquisitional tortures to the awakening body.

"Bad time, doc," said Bell's voice. "Hurry it up. I need you."

Idly, oddly, Hastings was not surprised to see the curiously humanoid figure bending over him. Hypo in hand, balanced in those tentacular fingers, Bell jabbed again, deftly. Awakening senses screamed with agony from the harmless, revivifying drug. Hastings did not question the urgency of command. Jangled universes came together in his tingling brain, became shimmering chaos, resolved as reality in three familiar dimensions came into sharp focus, as his disciplined body made habitual response.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Trouble, doc. Your department, not mine. Black Virus, I'd say . . . !"

"Oh, Lord! No . . ."

Hyperdimensional travel has its penalties. Among them, black virus infection, which is not black, not virus, not infection. One of the penalties. An alien protein native to those dark dimensions beyond dimension. A protein to which all mankind, most animals and plants, and even a few types of robots, were fatally allergic.

Strong fingers closed on Hastings' arm and hustled him along. Exertion cleared his mind and fear roused his senses to action. Now thoroughly awake, resistance to Bell did not occur to him. He permitted Bell to drag-lead him through the passenger compartments into the crew's quarters. One glance was sufficient. Half the crewmen were already dead. Hideously dead. Others writhed in convulsions, wrenched out of their shockblocks, their faces blotched with dark weals, chest and abdomens bloated and bursting with agony.

"Chiefly the crew, so far," Bell explained. "Only one of the passengers had contact with it. Or with them. They must have got it on the out voyage, before reaching Pluto."



Hastings nodded, numb with horror.

"Can we help them?" Bell asked calmly.

"Not much. Drugs by injection to kill the pain. A few may survive, the stronger ones, and they may wish they hadn't. We'll try to keep it from spreading to the other passengers. There are treatments, but not here. If we could reach the hospital at Luna City—"

Hastings' voice sounded hopeless.

"It's not too far," Bell commented. "We're well inside the orbit of Mars. A week of deceleration and orbit trimming. Plenty of fuel."

"But who'll handle the ship?"

"They can't?"

"None of them—ever. Even if they live to reach Luna City."

"Then I'll have to," Bell said confidently.

Hastings stared as if the robot-man had suddenly gone mad. "No one man could handle the ship," he gasped. "Even if you knew all about space ships and how to land them. Trimming orbit is a full-crew job. And landing is ticklish enough for old hands. You don't know a thing—"

"No," agreed Bell. "But I'll manage. No man could, but I'm not a man, as you pointed out. More or less. We'll find out now which it is. I can do it. I'll have the robots and the automatic machinery. We understand each other."

Hastings wasted no time in futilities. "That's your department. Do whatever you can. Send a warning to Luna City for relay to Earth and Pluto. Then get me a couple of the more intelligent passengers. I'll need help."

"They won't come," Bell said, with the nearest a grunt of disgust he could manage. "They're human enough to be scared. Not that I blame them. I can remember being that human myself. You'll have to settle for whatever help I can give . . . between errands."

Hastings swore and accepted the inevitable.

NINE days of nightmare. Four of the remaining crewmen died and were promptly incinerated. Bell attended to this gruesome task, and others too ugly for print. He ate rarely and slept not at all. He took over completely when Hastings col-

lapsed from sheer exhaustion, rousing him again only when the vital necessities of ship management demanded attention. Apparently immune to contact with the alien protein, he handled living and dead without precautions. During the intervals when Hastings could manage the clinical requirements of his patients, Bell's brain went to work.

Feeding mountains of figures into himself, he became a living calculator, resolving the mathematical mountains into the twinned equations of orbit and objective. By tricky gearing and fantastic jumbles of wiring he increased the efficiency of both automatic machinery and the non-humanoid robots. Simple devices accomplished prodigies of result.

Passengers were herded into a confined space near the nose of the ship, and kept strictly quarantined. Two of the passengers showed unmistakable signs of exposure and were segregated. All the routine tasks of the ship went into the hands of the machines, functioning under the direction of Bell, half-man, half-machine.

"I still don't understand how you managed to get aboard," said Hastings, half-angrily. "But I'm damned glad you did. Even if you don't make the landing and set us down like a panful of scrambled eggs, it's still been interesting to know you. We searched every place in the ship that a stow-away could possibly have hidden."

It was the last day out from Luna.

"You tried too hard, doc," Bell laughed, his sharp, metallic clattering laughter. "I didn't stow away. I was one of the crewmen who helped you search the holds. Nobody ever notices a man in uniform, and I helped them overlook me. These eyeplates are the secret, for people look too hard at them, and it's easy to hypnotize them. Then I will them to see whatever they expected to see. You made everything too easy for me."

"That's what I wanted," said Hastings, flushing, "to make things easy for you. But not exactly as you mean it. Never trust a robot any further than you can throw him."

Bell replied thoughtfully. "No one really trusts a machine. Man instinctively fears and distrusts his own creations. We try to reassure ourselves by repeating the time-dishonored formula. The automobile will



never replace the horse, nor the airplane the car, the rocket the airplane. And on down the line. For myself, I'm still faint-hearted about the hyperdimensional drive in spaceships. A new invention scares hell out of the stay-put mentality of the human race. We try desperately to convince ourselves that it isn't so, that these inventions won't really work."

"People will eventually outgrow childish fears," protested Hastings.

"To some extent. But never completely. People accept the new inventions, but only after they have proved themselves. When they become commonplace, comfortable, they are taken for granted. Often too much so. But machines do every job better than their masters and creators. And civilization goes wherever the machines wish to take mankind; machines feed man, wake him up, put him to sleep, wipe his nose, change his didy when necessary. So mankind returns to the nursery stage—with machines as the new version of benevolent nursery despots. Machines do the thinking; they are kind masters and eager, tireless servants.

"But inside, there is always the hate, the fear, the natural distrust that flesh always feels for the new, the alien. People learn to accept, under duress, just as children accept the despotism of the nursery. But machines are the real rulers. Mankind is at the mercy of machinery. Machines check progress, pass on the sanity and utility of every development. They are gruesome guardian angels but until mankind grows up, they are needed. Theirs is the problem of all guardian angels . . . to make themselves trusted and accepted. That's my problem. I'm half-machine, even though I am still more flesh than anything else."

Mars would have been a glowing, pink-orange coal behind the ship had it not chanced to be elsewhere in its orbit. Earth and Luna were a pair of faint crescents, one vivid blue, the other pale and ghostly gray-yellow, so far to the side that one unversed in astrogation would have feared a clean miss. However, by the time calculated, the ship would reach Earth's orbit and the planet and satellite would be there, in proper position and moving at nearly the exact speed to make landing possible.

There was hope now for those still liv-

ing. If Bell could only cap his miracle with another.

"What are your plans now?" Hastings asked. "Going on to Earth after we're cleared from Luna?"

Bell studied the psychiatrist wistfully. "Is it safe to tell you?"

"Why not? I'm on your side now," admitted Hastings. "You've proved yourself. If the population board gives you any trouble about landing, or going to Earth, refer them to me. I'm your man, your doctor and your friend. You don't have to worry about me, and I've stopped worrying about you. I can even believe you'll set down this crate in one piece. I'm awed. What do you want? Earth?"

Bell's voice was uneasy. "Not right away. I've sent word on to Jane. She'll take the E-L shuttle and meet me here. After I've talked to her, there are things to do. I'm afraid of people, doc. Honestly afraid. And I don't want to go back empty-handed."

**I**T WAS not a good-landing, technically. But there have been worse with a full-crew ship. Considering the emergency, and all of his handicaps, Bell worked the equivalent of a miracle. Bell saw to the transfer of the still-living crewmen to the Lunar Base hospital, then submitted himself along with the doctor and the well passengers to the thorough examinations of space quarantine. He enjoyed the discomfiture caused the staff by his unorthodox anatomy.

Fortunately the signs of deadly reactions to the misnamed protein are easily distinguished. Bell and Hastings were cleared in record time. And the shuttle from Earth was not due for a full hour when they reached the landing stages.

"You haven't answered my question, Bell!" Hastings probed. "I asked what you wanted. What are your plans?"

Bell hesitated. "I don't know exactly. It depends on what Jane wants. I have an idea about proving myself. But it will take money, a lot of money."

"You'll have a lot, Bell. Claim salvage for the ship and cargo. Stick the Company. They owe you something for that accident that should never have happened. Even according to law they're at fault for not providing safeties. Nobody ever argues with

the Company but you have that fat, greedy octopus over a barrel. You'll be rich and they'll have to let you go and come as you please. On Earth or anywhere."

Bell grinned. "I know they'd like to box me up and keep me buried alive on Pluto, just to keep my mouth shut. But you don't sound like a Company man, doc. Aren't you?"

Hastings snorted savagely. "They strangle business, suppress initiative, gobble all valuable inventions, and generally dictate subsistence terms to owners and workers alike. D'you think I went to Pluto to work under P. & T. terms because I liked it? I had to go or starve, and I thought I could do something for the men in the mines. They'll put meters on our breathing next. The P. & T. empire controls all sources of power, from water wheels to fuel and atomic generators. . . ."

"But, not sunlight or the cosmic rays, do they?"

"Wait a minute!" Hastings was pale but interested. "You're not thinking of wrecking the trust."

"I might. It would be fun to short-circuit that power. I could do it in a week. A guardian angel has to prove himself. Free power to everyone could be my gift. About that salvage money. Would P. & T. settle for half the legal amount?"

"They'll settle and be glad for such a comfortable deal."

"Will you handle that part for me? Save embarrassment. How's your nerve, doc?"

"Never better. Sure, I'll arrange the salvage deal. Why not? I'll even nick them for a fat cut of commission. But you can't get rid of me so easily. This is one fight I want a share of. And I'm sticking like a burr."

They watched the shuttle ship through the giant airlocks. Like a falling leaf it maneuvered, settling through the dense, hothouse atmosphere of subsurface Luna. Airlock doors in the hull slid open.

"About this free power. It's a simple matter of gratings to step down the frequency—"

"Skip it," said Hastings absently. "I wouldn't understand the technology anyhow. That doesn't matter. After all, I built

your superbrain. Anyone who can do what you've done, bringing in the spaceship and setting it down in one piece, not to mention saving all our lives and preventing the spread of Black Virus, is my man. If you say you can do it, you can."

Bell's metallic eyeplates selected one tiny figure among the many disembarking. He groaned.

"I guess this is it." The doctor gripped his arm, then left him alone to meet his fate.

She was a trim figure in a simple gray suit. Not beautiful, not extraordinary nor spectacular except in that individual way every human being is extraordinary and different from all others. She was in her middle thirties, even plain by some standards. But she was Jane, which was somehow important to Bell.

"It's all right," she said calmly, standing straight and firm, unafraid of the things time and change can do to love, or to other human relations.

"Don't hurry it," Bell advised. "Just remember that whatever you want is all that really matters."

"You're changed," she said rapidly. "Different in ways that I can't understand. Maybe I'll never understand. It may be pretty difficult but we'll worry about details later. You're still you, I think. Welcome home."

Much later Hastings joined the pair and was introduced. He made no comment worthy of record but while Jane attended to some formalities of disembarking on Luna the men were left alone.

Bell fixed his robot stare on Hastings. "Tomorrow we start Project Power," he promised. "Still with me?"

"All the way," Hastings agreed. "I guess that settles everything but the Jackpot Question."

For once, Bell's face-plate achieved the miracle of a completely human expression. Puzzlement.

"Is there another?"

"I think so. What are you going to do with Humanity?"

Bell laughed, the sound full of murmurous, metallic overtones.

"I haven't quite decided . . ."

# Eyes of the Double Moon

By JOE L. HENSLEY

*Praka, fabulous Jewel-city of the Two Moons, was holy ground not to be desecrated by Earthman's feet. But for Mark Rifle the booty-lure was too great, and he forgot the dire warning—the Martian night has a thousand eyes.*

MARK RIFLE dived to the ground when he saw the furtive motion in the darkness. The door of the Martian bar swung closed behind him in time to catch the point of the long, deadly knife that whirled far above his ducking body.

He came to his feet, his long, heavy body alert, seeking some sign of the unknown assailant, but the only sound was the rapid padding of fading footsteps. He reached up and tore the knife from the tough, resilient wood, whistling softly in the darkness as he felt the edge and point of it.

The night was quiet and only slightly dark around him. The two moons and the spotlights from the spaceport brought things into sharp relief as his eyes became accustomed to the dark after the brilliant light of the bar.

This was Marsport, fabled city. Its residents were a hodgepodge of all of the races of Earth and the tough brown-skinned Martians. You could buy anything in Marsport, it was said: Women, wine—even death, if you had enough to pay. And Rifle was the toughest of the looters of Mars' ancient cities.

But the treasures were almost gone now. In thirty years they had been picked clean and Marsport was now mostly a tourist resort for the rich, who frolicked disgustingly in its svelte clubs. Only a few of the old, hard-bitten adventurers hung on.

Shrugging, Rifle made his silent way to his hotel. He made a tall, blocky shadow in the half-light. His walk was springy for so big a man, his lean, old-young face was almost cruel, except for the lines about the eyes, which told their own story of humor.

"A good man to stay away from," they

would have told you. "Mark Rifle's okay," they might have said, "but don't ever let him get you across a barrel or catch you doing something wrong. And watch him when he smiles. He's usually thinking of something then that you won't want to have anything to do with."

Rifle took the autolift to the seventh floor. He walked down the carpeted corridor and opened the door of his room, knowing by the thread still attached to the lock that the door had not been disturbed.

He lifted the phone by the bed and squatted on one of the battered chairs until the operator got his call through.

"Hello Hawkins?" Without waiting for an answer he said, "I've decided to go with you."

The voice that came through the earpiece was booming cordial. "Good! Good! How come you changed your mind? You seemed pretty positive this morning."

Rifle took his time about answering. "You remember I told you that I got a warning not to have anything to do with you? Well somebody tried to follow it up tonight. Tried to fit my head into one of those Martian knives, but their aim wasn't as good as their intentions. They seemed to do one thing, though."

The other's voice was questioning. "What's that?"

"Arouse my curiosity about what's really in that old, ruined city. I thought you were just a crackpot this afternoon when I talked to you. I'm not sure now. I'll guide you to make sure."

"Can you be ready to leave day after tomorrow?"

"I can be ready to leave as soon as I change clothes."



*Rifle cursed the spectacle for he realized women prisoners of the  
Martians lasted a long, unpleasant time.*

The other man laughed. "The day after tomorrow will do. And Rifle. . ."

"Yes?"

"You won't be sorry."

After Rifle had put the receiver back on the hook he went to the large closet and began to drag out his equipment. He checked it all for wear, repairing an occasional piece. He finally settled to the long task of cleaning his projectile guns.

He sat on the bed, fingering the guns, making sure that each piece was in top working order and that the steel was without rust. His hands did the job mechanically, leaving his mind free to think about Praka, the great ruined city, once capital of Mars, in the days before the tribes had risen and gone back to the old, feudal way of living.

**P**RAKA, Jewel of the Two Moons. The high towers still stood against the sky, though they were crumbled and weathered with age. He had been there briefly once previously and had been lucky to escape whole. For most of the Martians were not friendly. There were those who still wanted to raise the banners of Mars, unite the tribes, and drive the Earthmen from the planet. To them Praka was holy ground, not to be desecrated by the touch of the hated Earthmen's feet. And it was closely guarded, as he well remembered.

He had heard the rumors of vast treasure in rare metal and stones buried somewhere in Praka's subterranean cellars. That was what had driven him before to make the gamble from which he had been lucky to come back alive. He remembered the hectic pursuit which had lasted halfway back to Marsport before the vengeful Martians had given up.

But Hawkens claimed to have a map, and though he had not shown it to Rifle, the man had been convincing. But after this attempt on his own life tonight someone didn't want him to go.

In the morning he disguised himself carefully in front of his mirror. Not a great number of men could pass themselves off as Martians, but for Rifle it was comparatively easy. He spoke the language as well as any native. The great, bulging chest that fifteen years on Mars had given him, pre-

cluded the use of any padding. All that was needed was more coloring, giving him the same brown shade that all of the wind-whipped and sandburned Martians had. He put on a Martian robe, and, of course, the mask, which effectively hid his tell-tale Earthian features, giving him the doleful, heavy-nosed, squint-eyed look of the Martians. Even his six foot four was small for a Martian, but the elevator sandals raised him another three inches, making him of average Martian height.

He took the self-operated, back elevator down and slipped cautiously along the streets until he came to the native market place. Several of the bars were already open and he went boldly into one of them and ordered a drink of the vile Martian wine. It came and he slurped it, aping the manners of the Martian, emitting great sounds of indignation when the bartender informed him of the price.

"Son of a heap-monster," he exclaimed. "I swear you tavern keepers are no better than Earthians in your continual quest for money."

The bartender laughed at him, but several of the patrons turned and watched him interestedly.

He took another deep drink of the wine and winked at the most fierce looking one of them. "Join me in a drink," he invited. "This Knurth will take my money from me anyway. I might as well buy some companionship before it is gone."

The Martian edged closer. He was enormous even for a native.

"When the twin moons broke your shell you must have been drawn by the tides toward them," Rifle said, incredulous at the Martian's huge size. It was an old saying, having reference to tribal custom of leaving an egg in the sun to break. The larger individuals—Martians put great emphasis on size—were supposed by custom to emerge first.

The Martian smiled and preened himself in the reflection of the cracked mirror behind the bar. He fingered the pommel of his long, heavy knife and smiled at Rifle.

"In what tribe were you hatched?" he asked politely.

"The Kaleps. And you?" He prayed this one would not be of Kaleps, though the

chances were very slight.

"Cartgas. We are camped nearby." He looked suspiciously at Rifle. "You are a long way from your fires."

"A long way," Rifle echoed sadly. "And I cannot return too soon. I was hunting and was drawn on the long trail of a Kanath herd." The Kanath was Mars' chief furbearing animal, very savage, but much prized by the tribes for the heat it gave as covering during the cold nights.

The Martian watched him, evidently satisfied. "What news do you have?"

"There is much dissatisfaction at my fires," Rifle said. "The newly hatched would drive the Earthman back into the void whence he came."

"Do they send a party to the sacred city?"

"Alas, I do not know. It had not been decided when I left for my hunt."

"Hurry back to your tribe, Kalep," the native said with some urgency. "Soon all of the men will be needed if Mars is ever again to be ours. Tell them that you have talked with a Cartgas, who has heard that the priests have a weapon to drive away the Earthmen."

"I return tonight. What is this magic weapon, so that I may tell my firebrothers of it? Is it a weapon of terrifying destruction or some subtle magic that the priests have devised?"

The Martian became secretive. "I cannot tell." He smiled. "In truth, I do not really know. I have not seen it. The priests say that they will show us in good time."

Rifle bought a final drink, shudderingly drank it, and clapped the heavy Martian on the back. "Moonspeed," he said, and the Martian echoed him. Rifle made his way out of the bar, rolling a little to indicate drunkenness. Then he went back to his hotel by a devious route.

WHEN he entered his room the telephone was ringing. He jerked the receiver off the hook. "Rifle here," he said, in a heavy voice. He peeled clothes and mask off as he sat on the chair.

"Hello Mark. Where have you been? I've been trying to get you all morning." It was Hawkens' peevish voice.

He swiftly outlined the events of the morning to Hawkens who listened without

breaking in until he was done.

"We'd better get moving early tomorrow then. Come over to the hotel and meet the rest of the party."

"Rest of the party?" Rifle said angrily. "I thought there was just going to be the two of us. There'd be a chance that way," he said sarcastically, "but don't let that hold you back. Take eight or ten. We won't have to go very far that way. They'll get us as soon as we're out of sight of Marsport. I can't guarantee anything if you're going to drag along others. Two of us could slip into Praka, if I can get you disguised well enough and teach you to keep your mouth shut."

"We can leave the other two outside, but we *have* to take them along. They won't by any trouble," Hawkens said, placatingly.

"Okay, it's your funeral. But if a big party gets us caught in anything, I'm pulling out fast. You can shift for yourselves."

"Come on over and meet them and we'll discuss plans. I want to check my supply list."

"You don't need many supplies in the Martian desert. You've got to live mostly on what you find there." He sighed and looked resignedly at his watch. "Give me fifteen minutes."

In less time than that he was at Hawkens' hotel, which was much more elaborate than his own. He sighed as he looked around at the beautifully decorated interior. Too bad that he needed money to live the way he enjoyed. Maybe, after this time, he could quit for awhile—even go back to Earth for a short vacation.

He knew the room number from having been there yesterday. He got into the plush auto-lift and went up to the fifteenth floor.

Hawkens had been drinking and Rifle felt a slight disgust when he saw the smiling, florid face. The man was big, fat and fortyish. He could, however, be effectively disguised and the desert would soon wear some of that girth off of him. There was still plenty of muscle buried underneath the fat, Rifle noted approvingly.

Hawkens clasped his hand, like the hearty business man that he was, and ushered him into the room. Rifle noted with approval the good whiskey on the table. He also approved of the small, middle aged, balding



man, who slouched comfortably in the easy chair. His face was lean, hawklike and weathered. He'd been around a bit, Rifle decided.

"This is May Price, Mark. Shake hands." They shook, the hard, horny palms each seeking mastery, the grips lessening as each recognized the other as a comrade in spirit. "Been here long, Price?" Mark asked casually.

"First trip," the man replied, just as casually. He coughed and it was a great racking thing. He covered his mouth, apologetically. "Venus, before this. Doctors made me leave. Said I was contaminating the atmosphere. That's a laugh. The atmosphere there contaminated me." A tiny scar on the side of his head whitened as he smiled. "I've kicked around a bit."

Rifle had seen one case of the Venusian water disease before; incurable, and in its last stages very painful. He felt compassion for the slight man. "I'll bet you have—I'll bet you have kicked around, at that." He turned to Hawkens. "Well where's the fourth member of this thing? I hesitate to call it an expedition because an expedition has a chance to come back."

"She'll be here soon," Hawkens said, wincing under the sarcasm.

"She?" Rifle recoiled in shock. "You'd take a woman out into that desert? You're a fool, Hawkens, but I didn't think you that stupid."

"I've been at him too, old man," Price's soft voice said. "Won't do any good. Without her there is no expedition. Disgusting isn't it. Might as well give it up. Poppa, here, is too old to spank her. And the map belongs to her."

"The woman is my daughter," Hawkens said with slightly drunken dignity. "She's more interested in Praka than I am. I've got plenty of money—don't need any more. I'm just indulging her whims, I suppose. She's the one who bought the map and it rightfully belongs to her. Lord knows that I've tried to talk her out of going, but..."

"I'm sorry, Hawkens, but I can't have any women on an expedition that I take into the desert," Rifle said. "Bad enough that I have to be stuck with you. Do you know what the tribesmen do to Earth women they capture? They don't kill them

—not at first. They..."

"I know," said a deep resonant female voice behind him. "And it doesn't make the least difference to me. I have no intentions of being caught. That's why I had Dad try to hire you as a guide. You have a reputation, Mr. Rifle. Not a good reputation but one for getting things done."

He turned and watched her and the sight almost made him change his mind. She was looking at him contemptuously. The same way he had been looking at Hawkens. Her huge eyes watched him and in her own way her sculptured features looked as coolly dangerous as May Price's. She was a curious, long-legged, catlike woman; her movements showing both efficiency and self-reliance. Not that she wasn't beautiful. She was that and much more. She radiated such magnetism that even as he listened he lost the sense of the words and was caught up in the spell of the magic voice and slenderly rounded, young body.

She brought him out of the spell. "Now Mr. Rifle, do you go or do you stay? Make up your mind as I'll have to be hiring another guide."

He smiled at her, but it was not a pleasant smile. "I'll go, Miss Hawkens, but there'll be times when you wished you'd stayed home and caught up on your knitting."

She smiled back, ignoring his remark. "Good. Now here is the map. See if you can figure it out for us. And remember," she added significantly, "that I've already had it translated." She got the rolled, fine parchment out of its container and laid it on the table, carefully smoothing the creases. Rifle frowned at the new look of the map.

HE studied the map intently and sipped the drink that Hawkens had thrust into his hand. He could feel the outlines of the city come back into mind as he looked at the crude drawing. "The big round spot in the center," he said. "See the markings on it? That's the central temple. At one time it was the center of all the demon-ancestor worship on Mars." He pointed at the map. "Something of importance there, probably down in the crypts below. Notice how the artist has marked around it three times the sign of the planet and two moons?



That means something of value lies there. It's the sign you see on all of the native money. The last time I was there I searched the outer buildings. Didn't think about anything being hidden in the tower because they still use it. It's going to be the very devil to get in there."

"Do you read Martian?" the girl asked. From the look in her eyes he had an idea she was testing him. She was leaning over his shoulder and he could smell her perfume. She was very desirable.

He shook his head. "No, I'm strictly an ear man. I can savvy it and speak it well enough to get by. But I don't think any Earthman will ever be able to read that crazy stuff. Their language changes with the time. You have to have the key to a certain written message in order to figure out in what hour of the day it was written, and language written in one hour is quite different than that written in another. Only the priests are able to read it and they spend a lifetime learning."

"I had a renegade priest, one of the friendly ones, translate this for me," the girl said. "It says, *Watch the middle door; the monster lies behind.* That is, if I can trust the way he translated it for me."

"You can't," Rifle said shortly.

They talked on for a long time. Rifle was loath to leave the girl's presence. He found her much different than the usual society girls who were attracted to him because of his reputation. He made several suggestions for discarding unnecessary equipment that Hawken had included in his list. As the afternoon and evening wore on he became more impressed with Price who made some very good suggestions. He even found himself smiling at Hawken.

Late in the evening, he reluctantly went back to his hotel, gave his equipment one more perfunctory check, and then hit the sack. He slept dreamlessly.

"IT'S a great deal different than I had imagined it would be," the girl commented, as she looked around at the flat, Martian landscape. Her hair was soft and lustrous underneath the hat that Rifle had insisted that she and the others wear. The sun rays on Mars are not held back by any

thick blanket of atmosphere and though the temperature rarely went over fifty degrees, Fahrenheit, the sun could still be wicked. It could dry one out sufficiently in a very short space of time if care was not taken. Heat exhaustion, madness, and death came quickly then.

The bubble of Marsport lay behind them, with its Earthian atmosphere. It seemed very alien as they looked at the lichen covered, stony sand. The broad desert beckoned toward the north where Praka treacherously awaited them.

And though the sands looked barren, except for the slight growths which dotted them, Rifle knew, from long experience, that it was teeming with life; alien life, which made its abode beneath the surface or in deep caves.

The thin air was breathable but cold in the early morning. It seemed to resist pumping into his lungs as he trudged along. Already the hot sun beat down, warming the sand, making it bite through the party's heavy boots. And sometimes it reflected itself back blindingly from the occasional flat, glassy patches of sand.

It was very quiet and lonely and Rifle found himself staring with the girl, taking one last look at the fading sight of Marsport.

They turned, finally, and he looked at the desert. "Yes, it's different, different from anywhere else. You'll never see a place as different or as dangerous. Don't wander off because there are things that make no bones about hunting human beings for food, and I don't mean Martians, altogether, Miss Hawken."

"Yes sir." She smiled at him and saluted gravely. "But I think we can dispense with the Miss. May I call you Mark?"

She smiled again at his heavy nod. "Then call me Pat."

He could not help a quick feeling of pleasure at the company of this very provocative girl.

Behind them Hawken was already red-faced and tired from the unaccustomed walking, even in the light Martian gravity. Price was grinningly helping him over the slight rises and hummocks. He smiled as Rifle turned and made a swift, secret motion of contempt for the struggling man.

Pat saw the motion and laughed at the serious look on Rifle's face. "I'm afraid my father is not in what you'd call the pink."

"It can be serious, you know. It's very easy to have trouble out in this desert if your heart or lungs are bad. We'll take it slow the first couple of days."

"He's plenty strong but I'm afraid he's just been away from this life too long. For the past five years the most exercise he's gotten has been a little week-end golf. His heart's sound, though. And he used to do plenty of hard work before he made so much money. You know," she confided, "that's about half of my reason for making this trip—just to get him back in shape and interested in doing something besides making money."

He watched her as she walked easily along beside him. Her finely formed features intently studied the desert ahead. "I'm sorry about last night but I'm still right in what I said."

"I'll take my chances." Her face never lost the light smile.

They camped at noon near the ruins of a small town. They broke out the condensed rations and built a small fire. Rifle gathered water by crushing a large mass of the lichen plants and soon had a pot of coffee boiling over the fire. They sat spraddle-legged around it and tore into the unappetizing rations.

"How many days is it to Praka?" Hawkens asked Rifle, as he wiped the perspiration from his round, steaming face. "I wish we had taken a helio and flown."

Rifle was patient for once. "I explained why we couldn't take a helio. The tribesmen would have seen it from the air and the word would have been passed. That's why we can't take any motorized equipment also. They can follow the tracks too easily. It will only take about ten days to march it. In a few days we'll switch to traveling at night and sleeping by day. That way there's less chance of being seen by a traveling tribe. Right now, if we're seen, we'd probably be mistaken for a group of tourists out on a trek for souvenirs. They won't bother us this close to Marsport."

Hawkens batted irritably at one of the enormous-winged insects that buzzed

around his sweating brow.

"Don't anger them," Rifle warned. "They have a peculiar stinger they can eject with a great deal of force. It's not deadly but it's very painful and they can throw one through several layers of cloth. Don't drink so much water and they'll leave you alone. It's the moisture in your perspiration they're after. Wipe your head dry and put on some of this ointment." He dug through his pockets, finding it. "It will keep them away."

Hawkens' hand had stopped in mid-air at the warning sound of Rifle's voice. He wiped his head vigorously once more and began to rub in the ointment. Rifle had the rest of them use it as a precaution after Hawkens was done. He spent the rest of the noon hour describing some of the eccentricities of the fauna and flora to them.

They broke camp a little after noon, repacking their knapsacks and adjusting the loads that Mars' gravity made almost unnoticeable.

They made good progress and Rifle located the small copse he had been seeking a few minutes before dusk. He, Pat and Price removed their packs while Hawkens wearily dropped his. Rifle looked his disapproval but said nothing. He would not, however, let them make a fire. "No sense inviting trouble," he explained.

After they had eaten, Hawkens fell asleep almost at once. Price soon joined him. Pat and Rifle sat side-by-side, companionably silent.

"You really love it out here, don't you?" she asked, after a long silence.

"Why do you ask that?"

"It is something in the way you look now. I can see a great deal of difference in your face since we left Marsport. It's as if you had come back into your own element. The hard lines are gone and you look almost handsome."

"I don't really feel that way about it at all."

"I think you do but you hate to admit there's anything of the sentimentalist in you." Her face was very beautiful in the strange light of the two moons.

The compulsion was too much to fight down. With one swift movement he crushed her in his arms, kissing the ripe lips.

For a long moment she was motionless. Then she dug her hands into his sides and kicked at his shins. He released her and one stunning hand struck him across the face.

"I didn't ask for that," her icy voice said. "I suppose you thought I did, but I didn't want you to kiss me. Perhaps back in Marsport your peculiar brand of animal magnetism brings you women of a sort, but I'm not for you. Don't touch me again." She got up and stamped away into the darkness.

He watched her unrolling her bedroll. He smiled as he touched the red mark on his cheek, remembering the fleet instant she had responded to his embrace. Then he began to fix his own bedroll, noting as he worked that Price was awake. He smiled at the man and received a wink in reply.

THEY were camped, as day broke, in a small depression. Far away, through the clear, frosty air, the high spires of Praka jutted above the horizon. An occasional dust cloud showed the land was not desolate. The Martians were gathering at the sacred city.

Rifle felt the projectile gun at his side, unconsciously checking it for the hundredth time. It seemed in good working order. The trip had been uneventful except for the hungry Kanath that had attacked on their fourth night of traveling. Rifle had slain the beast as it sprang at his throat. After that incident he had noted, smilingly, that Pat had moved her bedroll back near his again.

They held a council of war in the first rays of the sun.

Rifle indicated Hawkens. "Tonight you and I will disguise ourselves and attempt to enter the city. If we are successful we will hide all day in one of the buildings on the outskirts and then try to get into the temple the following night. If what we are searching for can't be found in one night I'm afraid we'll never find it. I'd hate to be caught in the temple when the sun comes up."

"What do Pat and I do all of the time you are gone," Price asked.

"You wait!" Rifle said gruffly. "If we are not back in three days, try to get back

to Marsport. If it takes us any longer than that..." He let the sentence trail off suggestively.

They slept through the rest of the day, leaving one member constantly on watch. When darkness fell they made a hurried, cold meal. Rifle got the material for the disguises out of his knapsack. He helped Hawkens put his on and instructed Price in the art of staining him. He applied his own staining, put on the long flowing robe, and then cinched the skin belt around his middle. He regretfully discarded the projectile pistol when he saw that it had a tell-tale bulge. He slipped the long knife into the shoulder scabbard and immediately felt more comfortable. He checked, making sure that the stain was evenly applied over his whole body.

After Hawkens and he were dressed, the other two looked at them with approval.

"I think we'll do if we don't have to stand a rigid inspection," Rifle said. "I've never been detected yet, but then you only have to be caught once." He turned to Hawkens. "If anyone should say anything to you, pay no attention to them. I will tell them that you have taken the vow of silence until all of the Earthmen have been driven from Mars."

"Do you put any faith in this new weapon they are supposed to have?" Pat asked anxiously.

"They always have a weapon. I have heard the story many times. If they were going to kick us off this planet, they would have done it long ago—not waited till now."

They said their brief goodbyes and Pat's hand tightened around Rifle's as he touched her. "Take care of Dad. Don't take any foolish risks."

Then they were out in the bleak, bare desert. The two moons reflected down from above, turning the commonplace scenes into something of horror with the strange, weird shadows that resulted. They trudged the weary miles as quickly as possible. The long nights in the desert had toughened Hawkens so that he kept up with Rifle's rapid pace.

It was in the hour before dawn that they came at last to the gates of the great, ancient city. For a long time they had been

able to see the fires of the gateguards, beckoning them irresistibly on.

Rifle led his silent companion boldly to the gate.

"Who comes?" one of the gateguards asked, his voice sleepy.

"Two hunters who have spent the night vainly seeking meat for the stoves of our women."

"Hai!" yelled the Martian contemptuously. He examined them perfunctorily and made several ribald jests about what they had probably been hunting. "Why does your companion not speak?"

RIFLE explained that his companion had taken the vow of silence and explained to the guard why he had done so. He kept his hand very close to his knife as he did. The guard let them past finally.

The streets were deserted.

"Let's go on to the temple now. We could be out of here by dark if we got in there this morning," Hawkens whispered, insistently.

"Be quiet, you fool," Rifle said in soft undertones. "A Martian night has a thousand eyes. There will be guards around the temple and no one is allowed inside by day but the priests." He pointed to a spire which towered far above the other buildings. "There it is and it will wait there until tonight. Right now the thing to do is to find some place safe to hide."

They searched up the narrow streets in the early dawn until they found a place which satisfied Rifle. It was an old inn, so decrepit that no Martian would have used it as a dwelling when there were so many places in better repair. As they entered the ruined door Rifle could hear the Knurths run for shelter. The small, eight-legged creatures, with protruding eyestalks and great, ragged teeth, were dangerous when in packs. But the sound melted away and he and Hawkens made their way up a precarious ladder to the upper story.

He let Hawkens go to sleep in one of the debris-covered corners of the huge, upper room and took the first watch himself. From one of the battered windows he could see the sun rising over the walled city. The streets were lined with natives in a few hours. Most of them were dressed as he

was, but he saw the occasional distinctive, red cape of a priest, their cowed heads covered to avoid the sun.

He saw the battle insignia of many tribes, some of which he knew and some that he had never seen before. He tried to estimate how many there must be in the vast city, but gave it up as a hopeless task. Probably close to a million, or most of what was left of Mars' once mighty hordes.

He forgot caution in looking at the colorful spectacle the Martians made. He leaned out of the window. In a moment he was cursing his own stupidity, for his sliding arms dislodged a small stone from the rutted window sill, and it fell, striking one of the passing Martians. He ducked quickly back inside, but not soon enough, for the sharp Martian eyes caught him as he scrambled back. The Martian was alone and with the insatiable, fearless curiosity of his race he immediately started for the cracked door of the old inn.

Rifle acted quickly. There was a slender, rotted beam a few feet above the reach of his arms. It ran across the ceiling, ending just where the ladder entered. He leaped high and caught the beam and swung onto it. It swayed and creaked frighteningly, but it held. He snaked his way along it. In the corner of the room Hawkens still snored gently.

Rifle could hear the sound of footsteps cautiously coming up the ladder.

The Martian entered the room. He spied the sleeping Hawkens and muttered something under his breath. At the same time the beam on which Rifle lay gave one last convulsive crack as he shifted his body. The Martian looked up and Rifle's hurtling body caught him a glancing blow. The Martian fell, partially stunned.

Hawkens awoke and helped Rifle bind and gag the struggling Martian. When the job was done Rifle explained how the mischance had occurred, while the trussed-up Martian glared ferociously at them.

"Well there's nothing to be done about it now," Hawkens said. "We'll leave him tied up here when we go. Someone will find him in a few days or he'll tear out of the bonds."

Night came slowly. The streets became crowded after dusk. There had been a long

period during the afternoon when no one had been on the streets. Probably at a religious meeting of some kind, Hawkens had decided. As it became darker the hurrying figures thinned out until finally the two men decided it was safe to leave. They gave the prisoner's bonds a thorough check.

They walked the streets to the temple, without incident, occasionally skirting guardposts where they might have been closely checked. There was still a huge crowd around the imposing, somewhat decayed entrance to the temple. They waited until some of the crowd melted away and then cautiously ascended the stone steps.

The interior of the entrance was depressingly dark. There seemed to be a great number of people, many of them priests, hurrying about.

They located a set of stairs leading down into the bowels of the temple after a short, feverish hunt. Rifle led Hawkens down the deeply marked steps, taking care that none of the Martians saw them enter in the semi-darkness. The steps descended steeply and the darkness became like a heavy pall over them, the deeper they went.

Rifle broke out a flashlight and shot the beam of it over the moss covered walls. The steps ended and they came into a long passageway, which seemed to wind further and further beneath the temple as they skulked warily along it. There were doors, many doors along both sides of the passage, but most of them had the large double circle, which was the Martian sign for death, inscribed on them. They were crypts in which whole families of Martians, who had lived and died thousands of years ago, lay, slowly turning back into dust. The passageway was empty. No one but a priest would come here.

THEY investigated several of the more interesting doorways but found only skeletons laid out in solemn, formal rows. Deeper and deeper under the temple they went. The passageway became wet and clammy under their feet and the walls threw back the light of the flashlight reluctantly, as if refusing to give up its secrets.

At last they were brought up against a solid wall, in which three doors had been laboriously cut. The middle door was of

some heavy, glistening stone. It had resisted the eons of time and remained unmarked with the moss that had covered the other doors.

The doors at each side of the shining one were of some heavy metal. They were inscribed with the three rings of value, which looked as if they had been painted on the metal a short time ago.

They tried the first metal door. They pushed, straining together. Rifle felt the door beginning to give and dragged Hawkens away from it. It clanged back open on cunningly counterweighted hinges.

The room was empty.

So was the third room after they feverishly tore the door back. They stood, aghast, at the door to the third room. Hawkens began to sob in a low tone. Rifle played his flashlight curiously over the empty room.

With an exclamation he sprang forward and picked something up from the floor. He turned the object in his hand, examining it. It was the explosive ammunition for the projectile weapons.

"I think I understand," he said softly. The walls echoed his voice. "Let's get out of here. Our treasure rooms have been picked clean."

"How about the middle room?" Hawkens said in a chilled voice.

"You read the map," Rifle said, slowly. "If you want to open it, go ahead. I'll go back a hundred yards and wait for you. I don't intend to risk my neck on a bad gamble."

The other man watched him angrily. "All right," he said sourly, "let's go."

When they came to the foot of the long stairs they proceeded more cautiously. Rifle put his flashlight away and they felt their way up the long staircase. There was no one watching when they reached the top, but deeper in the temple Rifle could hear the surging hum of many voices.

And then, unmistakably, the cry of a woman.

Cold panic gripped Rifle. He turned to Hawkens, saying through gritted teeth: "Get to the outside entrance, where we came into this pesthole. Wait there. If I'm not back in half-an-hour, then go back to where we camped three days ago. Hide by day and run by night. I'll meet you there."

"But that sounds like my daughter!" The man started for the curtained door, but Rifle wheeled him around with one heavy hand.

"Do as I tell you. You'll be no help to me in there. It may be your daughter and it may be someone else. If it isn't, I'll be back out in five minutes. If it is, it may take me a little longer." He gave the man a shove. "Now do as I tell you. There's no sense in all of us getting killed."

He left the whitefaced Hawkens and went swiftly through the heavily curtained door that led into the assembly room of the temple.

They had her on the altar in the center of the enormous room. She was bound and almost nude. Her arms were bent back under the weights of heavy chains and one of them was curiously displaced. He cursed under his breath as he saw her face. It was almost beyond fear; almost beyond life.

He thought only briefly of Price, knowing the man was dead. Martians were very quick about killing male prisoners. He hoped that Price had died fighting. It was quicker and easier that way.

The evening's ceremony must be over. One of the priests was loosening the girl's bonds and they were leading her away. They would save her for another night, or many nights. Sometimes women prisoners of the Martians lasted a long, unpleasant time.

He eased down the aisle, head bowed as if in prayer, and made for one of the doorways near where the priests had led her away.

He slid between clinging curtains and started down a dimly lit passageway. Creeping slowly on he saw the fire leap up down the hall where a priest stood on guard. Stepping out from the shadows of the wall, Rifle walked boldly forward, fumbling with his harness.

He tapped his stomach and pointed at the skies in the traditional gesture of reverence. As the priest started to return it, he brought the pommel of the knife he had cunningly palmed, down on the priest's head in a bone crushing blow.

He looked quickly up and down the halls in all directions and then dragged the priest's unresisting body into a small wall recess, in which a ceremonial oil light

burned. He switched clothes with the priest, working with fear-numbed fingers, and then blew out the light. The Martian would probably lie for hours before he was discovered, he decided.

The room where they had her was easy to find. There were four enormous Martian guards in front of its door. He looked neither right or left as he approached them. One of the guards was courteous enough to open the door for him. The others gave him the perfunctory gesture of reverence, which he returned.

The girl lay across a rude bed. There were two Martian priests in attendance. They looked up at him with puzzled surprise. The guard swung the door closed behind him and he jumped quickly at them, cracking their heads together in one great, convulsive effort.

One of the priests slid to the floor. The other drew a short knife and hacked at him. Rifle felt the blade cleave through the flesh of his arm. He ducked the next lunge of the priest and with a back-handed blow he knocked the native sprawling. Mercilessly, he exploited his advantage, kicking at the Martian's head until all movement ceased.

Turning, he ran to the bed. "Pat! Pat!"

SHE came out of it after a few minutes. Her arm was broken, she thought, and she had numerous bruise marks over the soft, vibrant flesh. But she was all right. She was not hysterical or even surprised at seeing him. "I expected you," she kept saying, in a low, husky voice. But her face went dark with horror when Rifle asked her about Price.

"Dead," she muttered.

He tore one of the priest's uniforms from the recumbent bodies and placed it around her tenderly. "Keep your head down and walk on your tiptoes when we go out of here. Act as if you're sick and I'll support you. We may get by. And don't say anything," he ordered.

He banged the two priests again, to make sure, and then opened the door of the room after dragging the priests out of sight behind the bed.

The four guards gaped at them. "The priest is sick and I take him to his quarters.

The other will watch until I return."

They nodded servilely.

He half dragged her through the long corridors to the front entrance, where the shaken Hawkens still stood. "Come on," he whispered. "No time to talk now."

They walked sedately out of the temple.

They stole stealthily through the darkened city. He found the same crack in the wall that he had used to escape once before. They made their way up the wall, Rifle and Hawkens helping the girl and then made the long, desperate leap to the ground, landing shaken, but unhurt. They were once again in the desert.

After a long period of staggering through the weird darkness he let them rest.

He huddled with them and began to set her broken arm and tend his own superficial, but painful wound as best he could.

Her first words were typical. "Did you find the treasure?"

He watched her stonily. "Do you know what your treasure map was?"

Her face was puzzled.

"Do you remember the story of the NEPTUNE, the spaceship that crashed about fifteen years ago? It was never found and no survivors ever turned up. The ship was loaded with armaments for the Mars Patrol."

"I don't understand."

"Well, undoubtedly a party of Martians found the wreckage of the ship. They probably killed any survivors and hauled the weapons here to the sacred city, turning them over to the priests. Then the weapons were hidden until the hue and cry for the spaceship died down. The priests made maps to send out to other priests. All of this took years and years and finally you got ahold of one of the maps."

"We'll go back to Marsport and report to the authorities." He showed her the projectile bullet. "I found this in the room that your map indicated. I imagine the rest have been passed out and the Martians are ready for a wholesale uprising." He laughed. "Won't do them much good now."

"Why not?" Hawkens cut in.

Rifle smiled at both of them. "Explosive

projectiles deteriorate rapidly. They've waged psychological warfare so long that the saying, 'Martian Uprising,' is something people laugh about now. But they waited too long. I'll bet you that not one in ten of those guns is usable and not one in a hundred of the projectiles will explode. Still, we'll report it to the authorities."

Two nights out from Marsport he kissed her again. This time her reaction was different. She lay for a long time in his embrace.

"Damn," he said, after awhile. "I guess I'll have to share it with you after all."

"Share what?" she said, smilingly.

"The treasure."

"But there isn't any treasure."

He touched the end of her finely molded nose. "Ah, my sweet," he said lightly, "but there is. Remember the middle door? Remember the quotation: *Watch the middle door; the monster lies behind?* I figured out what that was the moment I saw it, but at the time I thought there was treasure in the other two rooms also. The monster is the last of the Martian emperors, the tyrant who caused the tribes to rebel. I'll bet there's a young fortune in his crypt. Even the door was of moonstone, which is fabulously valuable. Biggest single chunk I'd ever seen."

"But you wouldn't let Father open the door?"

His face was hurt. "I told him he could open it." He kissed her again. "After all a man has to eat." He shook his head philosophically. "I always was a sucker for a nice set of legs. We'll go back again someday."

She shuddered. "You will. From here on in I'm sticking to my knitting. However, as long as it's confession time I have one to make." She sighed. "I threw that knife at you."

"You WHAT?"

"Well, Father said you wouldn't go and I had to get you interested somehow."

He was silent for a moment and then began to laugh. He kissed her again. "I think," he said tenderly, "that you and I will make good partners."







# LAST RUN ON VENUS

By JAMES McKIMMEY, JR.

*It wasn't love of adventure that forced  
Caine onto Venus' forbidden Purple  
Plateau. Oh, no. But there was a  
wench named Cice—a five-imaged  
wench—who could make the heart  
of any pilot leap crazily  
through the Galaxy.*

THIS was Nicholas Caine's last run and he didn't like it. It didn't look right or feel right or taste right. Even the small jetcopter felt sluggish to his touch. He was getting it down too fast and up too slow. But that, he knew, was really caused by his nerves. Usually he was as cold about these jaunts as a piece of newly chipped ice; this was his business. But today was different.

This was the end of it and tomorrow it wouldn't be his business anymore. A man absorbed so much and he couldn't absorb anymore. He got to the point finally when he kicked it over and he said, "Thank you and to hell with it," and then he left.

And that was what Caine was doing. Only he still had this last run and it was wrong. He knew it. It was all wrong.

He glanced at the mirror that reflected the cabin behind him.

The girl with the brown hair and the white teeth winked at him.

Caine looked away quickly and thin muscles rippled along his jaw. He didn't know which of them was getting on his nerves more, the girl or the insane kid who was with her.

It was certain that between them they were getting him, and he jambed a hand forward. The ship whipped down through the air like an Earth sea gull, skimming the tops of the vine trees of the Venusian jungle.

"Oh, lookee, lookee!" screamed the thin twitching boy with the blond hair. "Swamp and jungle, snakes and lizards! Are there devils down there, Driver? Are there spooks and ghosts and witches? Hey, Driver?"

Caine didn't answer. He looked again to the mirror.

The girl was laughing and shaking her brown hair. The boy was using his camera, leaning over the edge of the open-topped cabin. He was about twenty-one, Caine judged. Six years younger than Caine, but he acted like he was twelve or thirteen. Caine hadn't liked him from the start and he hated him right now. He was just another rich kid who thought the whole system was a playground.

And he kept calling Caine, "Driver." If he did it once more, Caine promised himself, he'd kill him.

Only he wouldn't, he knew. He wouldn't do anything. Caine had asked for this job, taking people with too much money on sight-seeing hops over the wilds of the Venusian country. It was a long way for both Caine and his jetcopter from the days when he was out at the tip of the finger of exploration, when the American Colony had been only a rugged square on the flatland.

Now that was over and he was leaving Venus. And the reason why he was leaving, was because of people like the two in back of him. The stupid, blind, selfish people who had ruined every chance for a decent relationship between the Colonists and the Venusians.

Because the Venusians were kind and honest and good, these people had swept over them like hail hitting flower petals. They had slashed and gouged and broken everything in their way: the earth, the vegetation, the Venusians themselves. Everything went down in front of the Colonist's hand. And then they laughed and spent the money they made and damned near tickled themselves to death with their own superiority.

Caine brought the ship up with a wrench, swearing under his breath. Well, this was the last time he'd have anything more to do with them. Tomorrow, he'd be on a rocket and this time he'd find a place where he wouldn't see another damned tourist the rest of his life. The only good thing about this was that he would use their money to do it. He wasn't a sucker like the Venusian. He knew how to charge six times over for a trip like this.

The boy was chattering and the girl was laughing and Caine made a slow sweeping circle over the yellow and green and purple jungle.

The boy was jerking finished three-dimensional pictures out of the camera and squinting at them. "Oh, Lord," he would say, giggling as he looked. Then he would throw the picture over his shoulder and grab another. "Oh, heavens." And that one would go over his shoulder.

"Hey, Driver!" the boy yelled. "Let's go down again."

Caine set his teeth and spiraled slowly in the cloud-dull air.

He felt a touch against his right arm. He

glanced down and found the girl's small foot beside his arm. She wiggled a sandaled toe and tapped him again with her foot.

CAINE saw her small ankle and after that, the neat swell of her calf. She wore no stockings and her skin was tanned the color of golden wheat—from long hours, Caine knew, lying in an artificially sunlit patio.

He looked at her in the mirror.

"Vanny wants to go down again," she said, smiling insolently. She shook the soft brown hair and her eyes danced. She had dark blue eyes, Caine noticed, and they sparkled and flirted. And Caine wanted none of it. He wanted to get this over and he wanted to get away.

She was making him more nervous than the boy was, only it was a different kind of nervousness. It was the kind that got into your blood and found your heart and your breath, and it was more dangerous.

"Down, down!" the boy was yelling.

"All right," Caine said. "All right."

He spiraled the ship toward the jungle.

"You know," he could hear the girl say, "I don't think Driver likes you, Vanny. I don't think he likes me, either. Why don't you like us, Driver?"

Caine concentrated on his flying.

"You know," said the girl in her husky voice, "maybe he doesn't like it because we call him Driver. Do you, Driver?"

Caine accelerated the ship and cut at the tips of the vine-trees. He heard the clicks of the boy's camera and his crazy yelling.

The girl touched his arm with her toe again. "What is your name, Driver?"

Caine looked up at the mirror and stared at the girl's eyes. She bent forward, her smile a quirk at each corner of her red mouth. She wore a thin blue dress that matched the color of her eyes, and its neckline was cut so that, as she leaned forward, Caine could see that she was probably tanned all over.

She smiled her white smile and her teeth were even and small. "Name," she said.

"Caine," he snapped.

"First name."

"Nicholas."

"Do they call you Nick?"

"My friends call me Nic. N-i-c. Pronounced like Nick. My friends call me that."

"That's what I'll call you, Nic."

He stared at her in the mirror, his mouth tight.

"Aren't I your friend, Nic?" she said, wiggling her toe.

Caine swung the ship. "Let's call it a day."

"Wait a minute!" said the boy. "Wait a minute!" He stumbled past the girl into the empty seat beside Caine. His thin mouth was suddenly hard. "I'm paying quite a little money to see this rotten country and I want to see it."

"We've been up an hour," Caine said.

"All right," the boy said sarcastically.

"We'll stay up six hours then, friend."

Caine felt his hands turn wet in the palms.

"I'm paying for this," the boy went on, his voice taunting, "and you're just the driver. You don't want to forget that. Now if I want to fly over this crap from now until Christmas you're going to do it. Isn't that right, friend?"

Caine's heart was hammering and he knew the anger was showing in his face. Any other time he would have handled this with a crack of his voice, or, if he had to, a crack of his fist. But not today. Today he didn't want any trouble. He wanted nothing to go wrong. All he wanted was to get it over and to get out.

"Did you hear me, friend?" the boy said.

"Yes, I heard you," Caine said.

"All right," said the boy, grinning meanly. "That's fine. We understand each other. Put her down again."

Caine snapped the nose of the ship down and the boy tumbled back into the cabin.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Lookie, lookie!"

Caine cut between the tips of the tree-vines. He nearly touched his wheels against a clearing. He climbed. He dropped. He fought the anger.

The boy worked his camera and the girl watched Caine through the mirror. There was a different look in her eyes now, Caine saw. A kind of mocking look that made the anger inside of him swell and beat against his temples.

He knew she was going to start and he asked himself, "Why? Why couldn't they leave him alone just this one day, this one time, so that nothing would go wrong?"

But he knew this had been that kind of a day from the time it started. He knew as surely as he was flying the jetcopter that nothing was going to be right about this day.

She said it: "I think Nic's afraid of Vanny."

He licked his lips and his tongue was dry.

"I mean," she said, "Isn't that queer? A great big strong man like Nic afraid of a little boy like Vanny? Why is that, I wonder?"

Caine took his hands from the controls and rubbed them against his knees. He could feel it breaking apart. He couldn't hang onto it.

Then the boy yelled and scrambled to the opposite side of the cabin. The girl's feet went up and Caine caught the flash of her tan legs. She laughed and shook her hair.

"Looker!" cried the boy. "A purple plateau."

Caine straightened the ship and began moving swiftly away.

"No, no!" screamed the boy. "Put her down there! On the ground!" He waved his hands and pointed at the purple-colored rise of land. "Did you hear me, Driver? Put her down, put her down!"

"This is Venusian land," Caine said grimly, "and I wouldn't put this ship down anywhere but Colony land."

THE boy was behind Caine, his thin fingers digging into Caine's shoulder, "I'll tell you what to do, friend. You just do it."

Caine turned and looked at the boy's white, unhealthy-looking face. The boy's lips curled again.

"If you want to fly," Caine said, "I'll fly you all day. But if you want to land in Venusian territory you get yourself another driver." He accented the word, driver.

The boy clutched at Caine's shoulder and hopped behind his seat. "Put her down on that purple plateau!" the boy yelled. "Damn you, I don't want to listen to your stupid voice! Just put her down, do you hear me, Driver?"

Caine could feel the fingers pinching his shoulder and he could see the white crazy face bobbing beside him. He wanted to lift just one of his hands and slap the screaming boy across the cabin. But if he did there

would be much trouble when they got back.

The girl's father, Caine knew, was the Treasurer of the Colony. This boy was her guest. They could make a lot of trouble for him.

He knew it wouldn't help, but he made one try: "Look," he said, "We've got a written agreement with the Venusians to stay off this part of the land. Don't you understand?"

"Oh, hell!" the boy shouted, "Oh, hell! Damn the Venusians! Put her down there, Driver. Do you hear me?"

Caine swept the ship in a slow circle. He felt the slim foot at his arm again. "Did you hear him, Driver?" asked the girl, her eyes mocking him through the mirror.

Caine dropped the ship.

The boy plunged back through the cabin, chattering, giggling, clicking his camera.

Caine looked at the purple plateau. It was not a plateau, really, it was a rather flat hill in the midst of the thick swampy jungle. Around it he could see the reflection of liquid and then the shimmering slick-looking vine-trees.

The boy's reaction to the fact that this was Venusian territory was what was wrong with this whole planet, Caine thought as he examined the purple hill.

"Damn the Venusians," was the slogan for the Colony. Damn them this way, damn them that way. Write a treaty with them, wink, and forget about it. Get them going and coming and sideways. Because their skin was green and their heads were round and hairless, that meant they were stupid and inhuman and thus to be taken advantage of.

They were not stupid, Caine knew, nor were they inhuman. And how much more advantage could be taken of them, Caine didn't know. There was a point of resistance to everything, even to Venusians. And Caine did not doubt that sooner or later the Colonists would push the Venusians to it. What then, only God knew.

Right now, however, all Caine cared about was getting away from here so he wouldn't have to watch this thing anymore. He was sick of it. Sick to the core. The months and months he'd spent trying to help establish Earth's civilization on this planet appeared now like having driven around in a constant circle, and finally real-

izing that neither he nor anyone else had gone anywhere.

And all because of people like the two behind him.

Caine swore bitterly to himself and circled the purple hill once more.

"Down, down!" the boy was screaming, and Caine could hear the girl laughing.

## II

THE nearest Colony post, Caine judged, was thirty miles away. That meant no one would observe his silver ship dropping into the forbidden jungle. But even breaking the treaty would be no worse than inflicting the wrath of a guest of the Treasurer. Or the Treasurer's daughter.

He drifted slowly above the hill. At least, he hoped, there would be no Venusians around this part, although you couldn't tell. If there were, probably they wouldn't do anything, Caine decided, because they did not believe in violence or in physical conflict.

But there was a matter of honor, and Caine for one, especially Caine, did not want to be responsible on this, his last day on the planet, for breaching that honor with these native people.

The perils of the swamp was a thing he saved for final consideration. They would go no further than the boundaries of the small hill. But in reality, Caine hoped that something might be down there, waiting to scare the stupidity out of the loud kid who was forcing him down. Caine didn't know what that might be, because you could never tell what waited for you in the Venusian jungle. It was all strange, unexplored land, and this land, Caine had learned, produced many very weird and awful things.

They would soon find out.

He dropped the ship slowly, aiming for the center of the gradually sloping hill. The boy was like a crazy bird locked in a cage. The girl shook her hair, her teeth shining whitely while she laughed, but Caine could feel her eyes watching him, watching him.

Caine knew then, in that split second before the wheels of the ship touched the purple hill, that it hadn't been the boy's demand that had forced him down, but the girl, watching him through the mirror,

taunting him, daring him, that had made him do this.

He looked up at her and the look she returned made a shiver dance along his spine.

The wheels touched ground.

The boy clawed at the door. "Lookee, lookee, lookee!" he yelled.

Caine's hand snapped out and struck the boy's fingers away from the lock of the door.

"Hey!" said the boy, spinning. "Watch out, Driver. Watch out with that. You don't want to make me mad now, friend. Do you, friend? Do you?"

Caine looked at the narrow glittering eyes of the boy. "No," he said quietly. "I don't want to make you mad."

"That's fine," the boy said, nodding. "That's fine."

The girl reached over and touched the boy. "You tell him, Vanny. You tell him anything you want to. He'll listen and nod and say yes to anything. He's a very sweet fellow, Nic is."

Caine jammed his seat back and stood up. He took out his holstered pistol from the small compartment beneath the instrument panel. He strapped the holster to his waist and turned around.

"I don't want either one of you going beyond the boundary of this hill. I don't like being down here. I'll tell you that before we get out. And so I don't want any trouble. Get out and look and that's all. In five minutes I'm taking off. If you're not in this ship you can walk back. Do you understand?"

The girl raised her eyebrows and whistled. "Listen to the captain."

The boy yanked at the door. "I don't want to hear your damned speeches, Driver. Open the door that's all, before I get mad."

Caine hit the lock and the boy spilled out to the purple-colored surface.

Caine looked at the girl. She sat there, legs crossed, smiling at him. "I asked you your name. You didn't ask me mine. Don't you want to know, Captain?"

"No," Caine said.

"It's Cice. Isn't that pretty? Cice? Doesn't it sound nice with Nic?"

"No," said Caine, "it doesn't."

She pursed her lips and stood up suddenly. "All right, Driver. Let's look at the jungle."

Caine climbed out and turned to help the



girl. He held up a hand and caught hold of her fingers. He looked up at her and waited for her to come down into his arms.

She didn't. She threw his hand away and leaped to the ground, a flash of gold and blue. She was like a cat, and there was no loss of dignity or presence when she landed beside Caine. Caine turned away and walked to the tip end of the ship's right wing.

He reached down and felt of the moss-like substance covering the hill. It was like a thick carpet, but spongier, and it was moist. The air was moist, too, and it was in the soft breeze that touched Caine's face and made the slippery leaves around the hill swing and slide together.

The boy was spinning like a gyroscope, snapping pictures this way and that, jerking the finished prints out, looking at them, and throwing them away.

The girl had walked to the front of the ship and stood there, very straight and perfect, letting the wind ripple her blue dress.

Suddenly, the boy swung around and vaulted to the short thin wing of the jet-copter. He crouched there, clicking his camera, while the ship tipped.

Caine yelled, and then as though the center had been split out of the huge moss carpet, it began to slide toward the canal of liquid around the hill. The ship swung partially sideways, while the white-faced boy with the camera pranced on its wing. Caine felt himself moving with the sliding moss and he jumped forward. The girl had fallen to her knees and was reaching for the solid rock-like surface beneath the moss.

**T**HE boy had frozen against the surface of the ship now, and as the tail jets hit the liquid, the silver metal melted and disappeared in the shimmering stuff like soft lead going into fire.

Caine let out a yell and scrambled over the shifting carpet and yanked the girl to the exposed rock. Then he jumped back and grabbed at the hook of the ship's nose, knowing even as he did it that it was a senseless action. The ship kept sliding.

Foot by foot it disintegrated, as though the liquid were an acid. Still the boy hung like a frightened animal to the silver wing. Caine lunged for the boy's hand, but he slipped to his knees and felt himself

sliding toward the liquid.

He reached up to the wing, now sticking in the air like a broken arm. He pulled himself to his feet and it was like standing on shifting grease. He found the boy's arm and yanked hard. The boy came flying off the wing and hit the slipping moss, the camera swinging around his neck, his arms fighting.

The ship had nearly melted in the liquid and the right wing, the last of it, crumpled and slid into the shining acid and disappeared.

Caine fought along the edge of the hill, trying to push the boy to the exposed rock that had lain beneath the moss-like surface.

The boy screamed and flailed his arms and legs, and the movement was making them slide toward the waiting liquid. Caine gritted his teeth and leaped ahead, pulling the boy with him. He found solid rock as the final covering of the purple carpet slid into the liquid.

Caine lay on the rock, breathing hard, his hands clutching the boy's jacket.

The boy shook himself loose and he was no longer screaming. "Take your filthy hands off of me," he said to Caine.

Caine's face flushed and his eyes thinned.

The boy stared back at Caine for a long moment, then he stood up and examined his camera.

Caine got to his feet and went up the incline to where the girl waited. "Are you all right?" he asked her.

There was a different look in her eyes. There was no mocking or sarcasm. "Yes," she said, shaking her hair and smiling a little. "I'm all right, Nic."

"Well, that's damned fine," Caine said, a line cutting between his eyebrows. "That's really damned fine because my ship isn't. Have you noticed? Three years of sweat and blood gone down the sewer. Isn't that fine?"

Her smile flickered and she touched his arm. "I'm sorry, Nic. It was our fault—"

He shook himself away from her touch. "Yes, it was your fault and it didn't need to happen, only you and the screaming idiot had to do it. Ships are a dime a dozen to you but not to Nic Caine."

Her smile had vanished and there was a bright glinting light in her eyes. She stood very straight and met Caine's furious stare. "I'll buy you a new one when we get back,



Driver. I don't want to see you cry. Wipe the tears away, honey . . ." she reached to pat his shoulder and he slapped her hand away.

"Keep your hands away from me and don't use that tone of voice when you're talking to me. I'll take that ship from you when we get back. If we do get back. And you can count on that. In the meantime don't push me anymore, or I'll . . ."

"You'll what?" she said, her white smile shining at him. "You'll do what? I'm interested. Say what you're going to do. Or better yet, just do it. I'm ready."

Her smile was a shimmering thing and her eyes danced like bright stars. Caine felt of his strength by clamping his hands into fists.

He hardened his arm muscles and his shoulder muscles, but he knew he didn't have at that moment enough strength to meet her smile and her eyes and her tanned smooth skin. He could strike her half-way across the rock, but she was stronger and he could see in her eyes that she knew it.

But that was her strength right now.

He would test it later and see how it was. And he would test his own, because if they were going to get out of this jungle, they would need all the strength they could find.

Caine whirled. "What do you want?" he asked the boy who had come up behind him.

"I want to know how you're going to get us out of here, Driver." The boy's face still held the same stretched sarcastic look, but his eyes were no longer sharp and insolent. The fright showed easily, and behind the fright, Caine knew there was panic.

"I'm not going to get you out of here," Caine said, his voice suddenly soft. "I'm going to leave you right here to think about your stupidity."

"Listen, listen!" the boy screamed. "You don't talk that way to me, friend. You listen, you don't talk to me that way, do you hear?"

Caine's voice was a quick snapping sound. "Shut up!" He stood there, body tense, his eyes glaring at the frantic youth.

The boy turned and ran a few feet across the hill where he fell down on his knees and crouched, his eyes darting like those of a penned wildcat. He lifted his camera, released the shutter, and yanked out the finished picture to throw it into the waiting liquid.

The picture skipped and then floated.

Caine stared at the floating picture. It lay on the surface for a long minute and then slowly it disappeared.

He turned and looked at the liquid where his ship had disintegrated. Bobbing near the surface was the plastic of the seats. Caine frowned.

The boy was running at him again, arms flailing, and Caine felt the sting of the boy's fists striking him. He pushed the boy back so that he fell sprawled on the rock surface.

"It's all around us!" the boy screamed. "The damned stuff is all around us. You get us out of here, Driver. Do you hear, you get us out of here!"

The girl stood over the wild boy. "You know, Vanny, you're really a jolly fellow."

"You keep your mouth shut!" he yelled at her.

The girl turned away and looked at Caine. "What do we do, just stand here?"

Caine watched the contained look on her face. He knew she was frightened and feeling the panic that was so obvious in the boy. But she stood very straight and her voice was very steady. She would not show her fear.

Caine pointed at the plastic. "The seat covering didn't disintegrate and neither did the picture. Only the metal of the ship."

"So?" she said.

"So maybe we wouldn't disintegrate either."

Caine walked down the hill and crouched at the edge of the liquid. The girl followed and waited a few feet behind him.

The boy still lay sprawled near the top of the hill, his darting eyes watching them.

Caine took a handkerchief from his pocket and dropped it into the liquid. It floated until it was soaked through and then it sank.

"All right," the girl said. "How do we find out what it does to human flesh?"

Caine looked back at the boy.

The boy slammed his palms back against the rock and his body tightened so that the cords of his neck stuck out. His lips trembled.

Caine kept his eyes upon the boy, flexed his fingers, and then drove his hand into the liquid.

The girl screamed and her hand flew against her mouth. The boy lay twitching

against the rock, his eyes upon Caine's submerged arm.

Caine brought his hand out of the liquid.

The metal snap that had fastened his sleeve at the wrist was gone and so was the small gold ring he had worn on his little finger. But there was no trace of effect on his skin.

Caine stood up.

There was only the sound of the whispering leaves and in the sky an infrequent sun appeared and edged toward the tops of the trees, sending its glittering reflection into the depths of the moat-like liquid around them.

Caine pointed to the vine-trees at the other side. "There's the direction of the nearest post. We'd better start."

The boy scrambled to his feet. He stood, feet spread, like a thin scarecrow. "You're not going to get me into that stuff! You can't make me do that. Do you hear me?" His voice was a screeching whine that rose and fell through the peace of the thick jungle.

"I'm not going to make you do anything," Caine said, unbuckling his holster. "You can stay here and starve. It'll be nobody's loss. Stay here. Both of you," he said, looking at the girl.

Her teeth caught her underlip and her eyes glinted. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you very much."

"You're welcome," Caine said, and then he turned and stepped into the liquid.

His nerves jumped inside of him and he wanted to leap out of the stuff and run and lie against the protection of the rock the way the boy had done. But he set his teeth and took one step after another, holding his pistol high above his head.

He felt his jacket open as the metallic snaps disintegrated, and the liquid seeped against his chest. His belt fell loose as the buckle went away, but his trousers, cut in the Venusian Colony style, hugged his hips tightly. The nails in his boots disappeared, and he could feel his soles coming off. The floor of the liquid was like soft clay against his stocking-covered feet.

The liquid crawled up until it was even with his chest and Caine kept moving, one step after another, forcing his muscles to work. The liquid touched his shoulders. If

it crawled any higher it would get in his mouth and melt the fillings out of his teeth. Caine thought about that and he kept going. He reached the center and the liquid rose no higher.

When he reached the opposite bank he looked at his body. His skin was not harmed. He jerked the useless boots off and threw them away. Then he hung his holstered pistol on the branch of one of the vine-trees to wait until his body had dried of the deadly liquid.

He looked back to the hill.

The girl was stepping into the liquid.

### III

THE sun gleamed against her hair, and her eyes were very blue and steady as they watched Caine. She took one step and then another, her eyes never wavering from Caine. The blue dress disappeared into the liquid, inch by inch, and Caine noticed the glitter of the silver buttons that ran down the front of it.

The girl moved slowly, and the liquid reached her shoulders and her chin, and then it was rippling against her lower lip. She was half-way.

She came up carefully. Her eyes were still steadily watching Caine.

It was a moment when the tenseness disappeared out of him, and the time and situation went out of his mind. It was a moment when there was nothing but the girl with the steady eyes and the shining hair, coming slowly out of the liquid, dress open, and golden-tan body rippling with each movement. Time stopped and silence hung in the air, broken only by the sound of her bare legs going through the liquid.

Caine watched, feeling his pulse beating in his temples and the girl stood before him at the edge of the liquid, her tan skin wet and shiny.

She took a quick breath and Caine felt his nails bite his palms.

Then she swept the dress together and held out her hand. "Give me your belt, Driver." Her face was expressionless.

He slipped the clasp-less belt from his trousers and handed it to her. She circled it around her waist and tied the ends together.

They both turned and looked back to the

thin creature crouched on the hill across the acid canal.

Again the still silence of the jungle was heavy and each movement of a leaf or the bend of a vine stalk echoed and magnified its echo through the wild growth. The sun reached the tips of the vine-trees.

"We'll give you three minutes," Caine called to the boy. "If you don't get over by then you can stay there by yourself."

The boy leaped up and ran to the edge of the liquid. His face was a white flashing movement and his hands flew as though the joints in his arms had turned to rubber. His voice screeched. "You won't leave me, damn you. You won't leave me!" He moved along the edge of the liquid as though he were doing a crazy dance.

"One minute," Caine said. "Two to go."

The boy skittered up the side of the hill and held his camera against his eye, pointing it at Caine. He ripped the picture out and ran back to the bottom of the hill, throwing it at Caine. It fluttered short, drifting for a moment on the liquid, and disappeared. The boy fell on his knees and hammered his fists against the rock.

"Two minutes gone," Caine said.

"Oh, you're rotten, curse you!" the boy yelled, and Caine could see tears glistening on the shallow cheeks. The boy crouched then, frozen, his eyes and tears glittering, his hands like claws against the rock.

"Three," said Caine, swinging around.

The boy's cry went into the air, a long, shrill whine. He stood up and through his open mouth came the cry, steady, monotonous. A weird crazy cry that stung Caine's brain and made him want to crash through the liquid all over again, to squeeze the skinny throat until the sound was gone.

The girl clenched her fists and Caine waved his hand at the thick green growth behind them. "Let's go," he said.

All at once the boy was in the liquid, hands clutching his camera in the air, moving, his screaming voice rising, piercing the air until there was nothing else but the hysterical sound. His eyes widened and his mouth was open and he kept screaming. It was a pulsating sound, like a siren, over and over. The liquid splashed and the boy moved, and finally he found the opposite

edge of the liquid and he fell onto the ground and lay there, still screaming.

Caine watched him for a moment while the girl stood, as though frozen out of motion by the terrible sound.

Suddenly Caine stepped forward, jerked the boy up by the collar and slapped his hand back and forth across the wet, insane face.

The screaming stopped, and Caine let the boy drop back to the ground.

"I didn't make you mad, did I?" Caine said, his lips against his teeth.

The boy huddled, his eyes narrow darting slits.

Caine turned to the girl. "Do you want to go with me, or do you want to stay here with your jibbering friend?"

The girl met his stare. "You're really tough, aren't you, Driver?"

"Like steel," Caine said, and he jerked his holster from the branch and snapped it around his waist. The sun was making long quivering shadows over the hill and the liquid and there was a cooling of the air. Caine strode into the tangled growth and began moving through the jungle.

"Nic . . ." He heard the sound behind him, a quick, involuntary word that she tried to stop by shutting her teeth together.

A little weakness, he thought, somewhere in the midst of the strength. He let his teeth show, without really smiling. "Are you coming?"

She came after him.

They moved together through the darkening entanglement of leaves and vines. Behind them now, they could hear the cashing, erratic sound of the boy, following them.

The light was dim as they penetrated the thick growth. There was a sweet moist smell to the air, and around them the yellow and green and purple leaves showed their colors vaguely in the Venus twilight.

Here and there sharp-edged plants with thick round bases and knife-like leaves quivered in the breeze like waiting swords.

ONCE Caine tripped and as he caught himself, his hand whipped against one of the plants, and he found his palm slit thinly. He wiped the blood against his jacket and touched the razor-sharp plant care-

fully. It was like a slim piece of honed steel.

Light disappeared, and Caine led the way through the maze of foliage. Slippery tongues of green softness, swirled around his ankles and slowed each step. Following direction was difficult, and the razor leaves kept nipping at him. A chill went into the air and a thick blanket of moisture fell around them.

Caine stopped. The girl waited behind him and Caine could hear the movement of the boy nearing him.

The girl was a misty outline in Caine's vision, but he could see the white of her eyes and when she breathed, he could see the fine line of whiteness that was her teeth. Her dress was a blue veil and the tan skin of her body blended into the darkness and the mist and the solid growth of the jungle.

The bobbing form of the boy appeared, finally, and he crouched a few feet away.

"We'll stay here," Caine said.

He could hear the click of the boy's teeth going together. The white gaunt face wavered and Caine could hear the swinging motions of the boy's arms. "You stay here," the boy yelled. "I'm not going to lie in this muck and dung! I'm not—"

"Don't then," Caine said softly. "Go on alone."

The boy was suddenly silent, and Caine watched his shape through the darkness. There was no more sound from him, and Caine knelt to the thick floor of greenness. He explored the soft growth with his fingers, and finally he stretched out, relaxing each muscle to fight the chilling penetration of the cooling night.

The girl lay down beside him. Caine could see her, the outline of her body, her eyes that watched him. He felt the touch of her fingers against his bare chest. "Nic . . ." she said.

Caine turned over and faced the other direction.

Sleep came swiftly. His mind dimmed and his body went limp and there was only blackness.

The cold light of dawn was in his eyes and he woke up swearing. His right hand swung out and caught air. He jumped up and leaped forward, but his hands caught nothing. The boy was away from him, twisting backwards into the undergrowth. Caine

knelt, still cursing, one hand on his empty holster. He could see the glint of the pistol in the boy's hand.

"What are you going to do with it," he asked the boy, "now that you've got it?"

"Kill you, Driver."

"Sure," Caine said. "And then who leads you back to your crib?"

The boy's lips worked back and forth over his teeth. He shook the gun in his hand. "I didn't say when I'd do it, Driver. You just stand up and start moving. I'll let you know when. Do you hear me?" The boy's voice rose to a sudden scream. The pistol swept through the air and smashed a vine to pulpy shreds. Then it was pointing again at Caine's stomach. "Move!" the boy yelled.

Caine straightened and began to move through the foliage. The girl started to follow.

"No!" the boy screamed. He jumped to the girl's side and grabbed her arm. He motioned the gun again in the crazy leaping way he did everything.

Caine started through the jungle.

He could feel the pistol pointing at his back and he could feel the stare of the boy's bright darting eyes. The boy was shrewd, Caine thought, like a crazed animal. Fear had warped the already wayward brain, and to try to charge him or bully him or anything else would be like striking matches in a room full of explosives. He would have to wait, Caine decided, until he found a chance to trick the lightning-like senses of the boy.

Somehow, he would have to find a way to sweep the pistol out of the boy's nervous fingers. And Caine was thinking of this, working it back and forth in his brain, when they reached another circular clearing.

Yellow and green grass lay glistening in the morning dampness. Purple and red flowers dotted the thick carpet. A wall of vines and thick leaves bounded the clearing and the thin razor leaves extended here and there from the thick wall like polished rapiers.

Caine walked nearly to the center of the circle and then stopped suddenly.

He could see them, just behind the first thickness of foliage. The pale green skin and the globular heads and the large round eyes, lidless and soft-looking.

He turned back to the girl and the boy. The boy waved the pistol. "Go on, damn you. Go on!"

Caine glanced back at the green-skinned creatures who waited in the green growth.

"I told you," the boy screamed, "you go on! Do you hear me?"

C AINE held his hands at his sides, feeling his nerves tremble inside of him. It wasn't fear of the Venusians that made him tense. It was the boy with the pistol and the girl and the total of things.

They were in forbidden territory, trespassing on ground called sacred to the native people of this planet. Caine, who had worked so hard to help preserve the sanctity of these people's rights, had become now like the rest of the Colonists he had hated so much. He had brought the evil into the center of the Venusians' own private domain, and he was responsible.

"Did you hear me?" the boy screamed.

"Yes," Caine said, closing his fingers against his palms. "I heard you." He watched the muzzle of the gun. If the boy's eyes found the Venusians, he would pump the gun wildly at them and there would be death, and the impact of it could unbalance the whole structure of the relationship that already was leaning precariously.

"Well, then, you do what I tell you."

Caine's eyes narrowed.

"Nic," the girl said. "Do what he says. He's crazy, he—"

The boy's left hand lashed out and struck the girl. She stumbled to the ground.

"You shouldn't have done that," Caine said, stepping forward.

The boy crouched, holding the gun with both hands. "You don't move any further. Do you hear? You don't move any further!"

Caine took another step and then he heard the movement of the Venusians behind him. He saw the boy's eyes widen, and out of the corners of his own eyes Caine could see the green skin of the approaching natives.

The boy cocked his head, his eyes shifting rapidly. His mouth was a grotesque leer. He yelled, "Oh, no, you filthy . . ." and then the sound of his voice was lost in the explosion of the gun.

As though he were dreaming, Caine saw the jerking of the pistol in the boy's hand.

He heard the peculiar screams around him as the bullets sprayed the clearing. He felt his shoulder burn as a wild slug cut his skin. Then he was diving forward.

The boy leaped sideways out of Caine's reach, falling and climbing up again, still firing the pistol. He yelled crazily, spinning and firing, and all of a sudden there was an end to the sound and the movement.

The boy was facing the clearing from the edge of the enclosing growth. His face was a surprised, contorted thing, and the pistol dropped out of his hand. He coughed once, and looked down at the red end of the razor leaf that had gone through his back and now showed its gleaming point through the center of his chest.

The boy crumpled and hung on the plant like a punctured rag doll. His head lolled at a twisted angle and his open eyes stared unseeing at the clearing.

Caine was on his knees, his hand against the wounded shoulder. The girl still lay on the soft grass, unhurt, but her face was pale beneath the golden tan.

Two Venusians lay sprawled across the clearing, their large lidless eyes staring at the sky. There was no sign of the others, and the jungle was silent.

Caine crawled to his feet. The wound of his shoulder was slight and already the flow of blood had diminished, but his skin felt as though it had been razed by fire.

The girl stood up slowly and looked at him, her eyes showing that fear had finally gotten inside of her.

Caine's eyes were hard as he stared back at her, and the hate and indignation for what had just happened made his stomach tighten and his hands tremble. In that instant, he detested the sight of the girl because she was a part of the group that had bred the crazed specie that hung now on the tip of a razor plant.

He wanted to hurt her, to make her suffer for the two green-skinned beings that lay dead; two more victims of a sweeping cruel invasion that cared nothing for the inherent rights of a native race; victims because they had been naive and trusting and basically honest.

So because he wanted to hurt her, he walked quietly across the clearing, lifted the limp body of the boy, and struck his hand

across the dead face.

Her cry was a short, shocked sound.

He snapped the body up again and drew his hand back.

"Don't!" she screamed. "Don't do that again!"

He saw the tears shining on her cheeks. Her lips were trembling and her hands were white tight fists.

He let the body fall against the impalement of the plant. He noticed then that the camera was still looped around the boy's neck. He held the camera in his hand, and then he snapped the strap over the boy's head and put it around his own neck.

"You louse," she said, her voice hissing through the small white teeth. "Why don't you take his money, too?"

He looked at her, his eyes steady and cold. Then he dug a hand into the pocket of the boy's jacket and drew out a wallet. He extracted a thick packet of Colony currency, put it in his own pocket and threw the wallet into the brush. His eyes were icy and full of hate when he looked at her. "He forgot to pay me for this trip."

She cursed him.

Caine walked quickly across the clearing and examined the two Venusians. Then he turned back to the girl.

"This is one they won't let go by. I'll guarantee that. Do you want to wait for them with your friend?" Caine said, motioning toward the boy. "Or do you want to face it with me?"

"I'll make you pay for hitting him," the girl said, controlling her voice.

"Sure," Caine said, his smile a humorless curl of the mouth. He crossed the clearing, picked up his gun and reentered the brush. He could hear her following.

He hurried. The remainder of the group he had seen in the clearing would be taking care of the two bodies now, and probably, the body of the boy. There would be no violence or physical harm, but these people were capable of strange things, and Caine felt himself searching the brush around him tensely.

The girl followed him stubbornly. And Caine lengthened his strides, smashing through the thick growth, dodging the razor leaves, skirting the muck-like pools that appeared here and there.

THE air was getting hot and sticky, and there was the ripe sweet smell that made him sick. At that moment, Caine realized that he hadn't eaten since this trip began and his stomach was like a hard knot.

Ahead was a small dark opening. Caine could see there a large scattering of the purple wild grapes out of which the common settlers had made so much wine. He pushed into the clearing and grabbed a handful of the rich-colored fruit.

He kept his back to the girl who had entered the clearing behind him. He sorted out one of the ripest of the grapes and lifted it to his mouth.

He felt his hand being caught.

The girl was beside him and her tan fingers were around his wrist.

He turned and faced her.

With her other hand, she took the grape from his fingers and held it up to his mouth. Her eyes were deep blue sparkling lights that shone even in the dimly filtered light. Her skin was golden and shiny, and Caine could see the long bare V that ran from her throat to the belted waist. The blue dress was filled with a jutting mound on either side of the V.

She took a breath and the dress drew taut.

Caine slapped the grape from her hand. She shook her head, her hair soft and rustling. She lifted another grape and held it to his lips. "You can't refuse it," she said.

"The hell I can't," he said, and his hand was an arcing motion that sent the grape whirling across the clearing.

"You can't," she repeated, and she touched her fingers against his chest.

He watched her steadily, seeing the blue eyes narrow to thin sparkling slits, the whiteness of the small teeth as her lips parted.

"I'm paying you back, Driver."

"You're cheap. For all your money and your breeding, you're no better than the ones who walk the streets."

"You're right, Driver," she said, and her voice was soft and husky. "And you want to be so strong and self-contained. You want to rule everything you touch or look at. You worship your own shrine, Driver, only

you're not strong enough to refuse this. You can slap dead kids, only you're too damned weak to walk away from me. You hate me for that, Driver, and you hate yourself. But you can't do anything about it because I'm stronger than you are, and you're weak, you're really weak, Driver."

He watched her, and her face was a golden oval that waited for him. He swept her hands from his chest.

She stood there, hands at her sides, and still she waited. He wanted to lash out at her face with his fist but he couldn't. All he could do was stand there, as though he were frozen, locked by her eyes and the white shine of her teeth and the golden smoothness of her skin.

Then he felt his hands and arms moving and he couldn't stop them. His fingers were jerking blue cloth and touching cool skin, and her face was in front of his, the blue eyes glittering, the white teeth shining. He tried to fight it and when she whispered, "You weak miserable coward," he wanted to crack her body in two.

But he didn't and all he could do was know the golden face was coming up to his, her eyes nearly closed, her lips apart—and then all at once he swore and sent her spinning away from him.

He stepped back feeling his heart jumping inside of him. Sweat prickled out on his forehead.

On the ground in front of him were five girls with the tan skin and shimmering brown hair. He heard "Nic . . ." and it was a multi-voiced echo. Five faces paled and ten eyes stared in panic. Fifty fingers clutched at five throats. It was a quintuple exposure of the girl he had just held in his arms, and it made his blood thin and chill in his veins.

"For heaven's sake, Nic . . ." and the echo of five voices wavered through the jungle.

Caine stood motionless, staring.

Five hands reached out for help. Ten eyes pleaded.

His nerves were like flying charges of electricity along his spine.

Then there was a sudden swift movement and the five figures before him meshed into one jumbled mass and began moving away from him, through the green growth.

He watched, feeling the sweat on his

forehead turn cold. This would be the way the Venusians would do it. Not force or violence, but this. A quiet, smooth absorption of the girl through illusion, the deadliest power of the Venusian. A hypnotic lock of his brain and hers so that instead of seeing four green-skinned Venusians and one girl, he saw five girls.

And there was, he knew, no way to break through the spell. The illusion would remain true to smell and touch as well as sight and hearing.

He heard five voices ring out together through the jungle. "Nic, please!"

HE STARTED forward. As he moved, he examined himself for one brief moment, asking himself why he was going after a girl he told himself he hated. And there was no answer, except the same pulling force that had made him want her with every fiber of his body only a few seconds ago.

He knew, reasonably, that a loss of a girl who was a daughter of a Colony official would have the same effect as a fired fuse in the relations between the natives and the Colonizers. But even this was, at the moment, unimportant, and it was only an emotion that drove him forward, an emotion that got into his blood and brain. And he hated it and he tried to free himself of it, but it drove him on, and all he could think of was tearing the girl free from the grasp of the creatures.

But how?

He didn't know, and he kept following the jumbled movement of tan skin and blue cloth ahead of him. He couldn't use the gun at his side, because he couldn't tell reality from illusion. He wouldn't know whether he would find his bullet in a green globular head or in the finely shaped head with the shimmering brown hair. He could only follow and think, think of an answer.

The jungle rippled with the movement of the five forms ahead of him, and Caine went on, swinging at the growth, swearing, sweating, driving his brain to find the solution.

The figures stopped, finally, in a short vine-enclosed square. He walked to the fringe of the opening and watched the five faces, pale and frightened, staring back at him. Five hands went up to five mouths and



trembled against red lips. "Nic, please do something!" The five voices rang against his ears.

"I'm here, Nic. Here!" The five faces pleaded with him.

He closed his hands, his eyes shifting from one face to another. He couldn't tell. It was like trying to capture an image in a room full of mirrors.

"Oh, God," the voices moaned, and together the figures slumped to the ground.

They were considerate and polite even now, Caine thought. They were letting her rest. They wouldn't hurt her physically, only move her steadily away to the oblivion of illusion. Cultured, quiet, but because of what had been done in a clearing miles back, deadly.

And he would have to fight it the same way. Against everything he had tried to do here, he was finally ending it up, forced to fight the people he had tried to protect and defend. He hated the memory of the boy and he hated the girl, but he was drawn into it as though he were being swept into a sucking, swirling whirlpool.

Caine kneeled down, his eyes watching the trembling figures in front of him, each of the forms precise images of the girl. He was tired, and even in the tenseness of the moment he could feel his hunger. But there was no time now, except to try to break through this armour of hypnotism.

"Cice," he said, listening to his voice saying her name for the first time. "When I say move, put your right hand out in front of you."

Five faces watched him.

"Move," he said.

Five hands extended into the air.

"What's my name, Cice?"

Five voices said, "Nic."

He worked his fingers. It was his own brain creating a mirage, and it was Cice's, too. The Venusians were sitting there, digging into each of their brains, creating this terrible block that couldn't be penetrated.

She was crying now, and the sound of it, magnified five times, ground against Caine's nerves. "Please, Nic," said the voices. "Please do something!"

He struck his fist against his knee, and the movement juggled the camera that was still around his neck. He grabbed it angrily

and began to throw the loop off. Suddenly he paused.

He remembered the frantic boy, ripping picture after picture out of the compact black mechanism. He dropped to his haunches, keeping his eyes upon the five images of the girl. They could make illusions of themselves to Caine's brain, but could they trick a camera?

His right hand slowly unloosened his pistol in its holster. Then he began talking to Cice, saying anything, to keep the sound of his voice over the click of the camera's shutter. He drew the camera up against one knee, as though he were making an unconscious nervous gesture, so that the lens pointed at the five figures.

He released the shutter, and it seemed as though the sound of it were magnified ten times.

He lifted the edge of the picture that appeared from a slot in the upper part of the camera, and finally he dropped his glance. He saw in the shiny photograph Cice and four green-skinned Venusians. Cice was the second figure from the left.

His pistol was out of its holster and in his hand, and the jungle screamed with the sound of the explosions and the cries and the ricocheting bullets.

When it was over, four Venusians lay sprawling, visible now to Caine's eyes, their hypnotic spell broken and their brains dead.

The girl, her hands against the sides of her face, was still on the ground, but her body had stiffened with fright and she was trembling all over.

"Oh, Nic," she said, over and over.

Caine stood up and looked at the bodies of the creatures he had just killed. The sweat that had formed while he had carefully trapped the Venusians turned cold on his skin. He unlooped the camera from his neck and dropped it on the ground. Then he stood there, staring at the dead green bodies, his face tight and mask-like.

The girl stood up unsteadily. She walked slowly to his side and touched his arm. He jumped away, as though he had been struck by a needle. A shudder went through the muscles where she had touched him.

"Nic, you . . ."

"Don't talk to me," he said, trying to

keep his voice even and not trembling, "and don't touch me. I don't want to hear you or feel you again. I'll lead you back to the post, but don't come near me or I'll kill you like I killed those poor creatures."

"You can't blame me for this, Nic," she said and there were thin lines of tears on her cheeks. "I wouldn't have asked for this."

"Oh, yes, you would. You did. That's why it happened. You asked for it when you needed me into coming down here. You asked for it when you couldn't remember that an agreement with these people was something valid and honest. You and your sweet dead friend, you're what's the matter with this planet! You can't understand what decency and respect are, so you step on anything that gets in your way, and if that won't work you kick it or shoot it. But you destroy it and you don't really give one simple damn, just so you enjoy yourself and get a laugh out of it. And for me, I'm sick of it, and I'm going to get on the first rocket I can find, so I can breathe again and feel clean and not get sick to my stomach every time I look around."

He hoped she could not keep up with him.

But she did, and he could hear her behind him, gasping now and then, crying once. But she followed him and when the jungle had turned dark and he finally saw the yellow lights of the outpost, she was still behind him, calling him.

He stopped and turned.

She leaned against a thick vine and Caine could see in the yellow light from the windows of the houses, that her hair had been ruffled and matted and that her dress was torn in a dozen places. A thin trickle of blood was coming from a cut above her left eye. She was barefoot, Caine noticed for the first time, and he knew what her feet must be like. But the beauty was still there and the bearing, and although lines of fatigue had been etched into her face, there was still the life and the fire.

"What do you want?" he said flatly.

She clutched at the vine and Caine could see her biting the inside of her lip. "I wanted to tell you, Nic, that I was wrong about you."

He waited motionless, keeping his eyes thin and hard.

"I thought you were strong, Nic. I thought you were the strongest man I'd ever seen. You were a challenge and I wanted to see that strength break. That's why I did what I did in that clearing back there. Only just before the Venusians came I knew you were going to love me, hating me at the same time. I didn't want you that way.

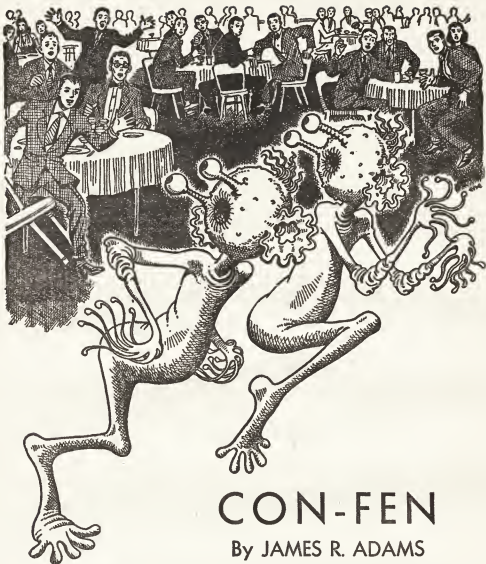
"It wasn't just a challenge then," she said, her white teeth gritting. "It was *you*, because I suddenly thought you were noble and honest and because I thought the strength was real. But I was wrong, Nic."

Caine wiped his palms slowly back and forth against his jacket.

She shook her head. "You haven't got any real strength. And you just carry your nobility and your honesty around like a sign. They're not inside of you. You scream for the rights of Venusians, you swear at injustice. You damn the people who've colonized this planet, and you hold yourself up like you thought you were a god. Only you're not. You're not anything. You're just another cheap screamer with wide shoulders and no guts. And instead of trying to do something about what you're screaming against, you climb into the first ship going out because you can't stand the sight of blood. You're not strong, you're weak. I thought I loved you, only I can't love a weak man, and you're weak." Her hand slipped from the vine and she crumpled to the ground.

Caine stood watching her for a long moment, then he walked slowly back and picked her up. He held her in his arms. With his left hand, he lifted her head so that he could see her face, and he saw the fatigue there that had finally made her collapse and he saw the blood that was still trickling along her cheek.

He bent down and kissed her lips, gently, and then he began to walk toward the yellow light and the warmth and the rest. She was light and soft in his arms, and he liked the feeling of her there. And so he took his time, step by step, because he knew he wasn't going anywhere, not for a long time.



## CON-FEN

By JAMES R. ADAMS

*The Shisti and the Assistant Shisti of Mars chose Chicago, U. S. A., for their vacation spot. No worries; they were invisible. Plenty of rich food; the joint was loaded. A whole year of frolicking in store. Only one thing they overlooked—there was a curious convention going on.*

THE landing on the green planet, Koosh told himself in satisfaction, was one of utmost perfection. Not that that made it unusual, since the Martian craft all but handled itself and invariably performed almost one hundred per cent flawlessly.

But Koosh did feel that this landing was a little, just a little, better than average, and his ability as pilot had made it so.

Thuko apparently thought the same, for he touched the other on the back of the neck in brief compliment.

Twirling his eye-stalks in pleasure, Koosh pressed a button on the control panel and arose to follow Thuko to the opening airlock, hopping on one leg, which happened to be all that he or any Martian possessed.

They emerged into warm, late summer air. For a moment they stood, filling their lungs, reveling in the rich, heady atmosphere that was so unlike their own.

"Wonderful, Thuko!" Koosh enthused. "And to think we have a full year of it ahead of us!"

"You are no less pleased than I," Thuko agreed. "But we must take care that nothing happens to the ship in that time. Loss of it would mean the end of all this."

He did not need to mention the reason. Koosh knew that it was because the small craft was the only one in existence. At least, as far as Mars was concerned. And of course that was because—well, actually it was not a Martian ship.

Thousands of years ago a lone, exploring Jovian had landed on Mars. After brief inspection of the machine, the Martians had decided it was a thing much worth having. They promptly murdered the Jovian, thereby neatly solving the problem of how to gain the gleaming silver sphere for themselves.

Operation of the ship had proved only a matter of learning the right buttons to push. And the Martians were more than capable of making the few simple repairs it required from time to time. But they were stumped completely by the anti-gravity plates that drove it. All attempts to duplicate them had ended fruitlessly. The original would have to serve them until another Jovian came.

"Where shall we put it for safekeeping?" Koosh asked. Then, answering his own question, "I imagine a likely place would be on the roof of an unoccupied building in whatever city we choose as our initial—ah—host."

"That is a good suggestion," said Thuko. "A rooftop would be ideal. Let us proceed to find one in a suitable metropolis."

Reentering the ship they took it aloft and skimmed over Earth's surface, presently coming above a large city. A Terran would have recognized it as Chicago. Eye-stalks pressed to the quartz window, the alien

pair scrutinized closely each building they passed over.

"There's one!" exclaimed Koosh. He pointed with the longest three of his nine tendril-like appendages. "See it, Thuko?"

"I see it. Yes, it is obviously empty of life and has been for some time. Set down the sphere, Koosh."

Ten minutes later they were standing on a gravelled rooftop, sucking in more of the wonderful air of this hospitable world.

"And so we begin our vacation on Earth," Koosh murmured softly, reverently. "A year, Thuko! a year of breathing this nectar . . . of stuffing our poor starved bodies with fine foods unknown to Mars' barren soil. A year of abundance!"

Vacation. The Martians had acquired, however dishonestly, the means of travel through interplanetary space, and could think of no better purpose for it than hauling them to vacations on Earth, a world they had long known to be rich in those things vital to life.

Unfortunately for the masses of Mars, the sphere could only carry two passengers a trip, with one acting as pilot. Therefore its use had been strictly limited to high officials. Too bad for the masses; but lucky for Koosh and Thuko, since they both held important offices. They were merely the Shisti and Assistant Shisti, respectively.

The Assistant Shisti spoke now, the round orifice in the center of his face rapidly dilating and contracting. Ignoring the other's ecstatic babbles, he said, "This will be fine, Koosh. Little could happen to the ship here, unless the building collapsed. And of course we need not worry too much about the place remaining untenanted. That really makes small difference."

KOOSH drooped his eye-stalks in agreement. "Except that the chances of accident would be increased somewhat. But now, let us leave here. This gravel punches through my sandal and hurts my foot."

On the street, they paused to consider their next move. While they stood there debating, a seedy, stoop-shouldered human came shuffling along the walk and passed between them unheedingly, mumbling something about, "Need dough. Gotta get wine money . . ."

The Shisti casually watched him out of sight around the corner, then said, "Astounding, Thuko, astounding. He gave no indication of having seen us. I must admit I don't completely understand it."

"Who does?" countered Thuko. "It is something that science cannot satisfactorily explain. All the savants know is that most of these Earthlings do not believe in our existence, and somehow that nonbelief acts to prevent them from acknowledging the evidence of their senses that we are among them. Furthermore, wherever we go, if even one human in the immediate vicinity refuses to accept our reality, then we are apparent to none, though we stand before a thousand."

"The same thing applies to the ship. Not only that, but suppose I steal an object right out of the hands of a human and place it elsewhere. To his mind it ceases to exist—never did exist. There was nothing to move it; it could not move itself; so his weak intellect takes the easiest way out by rejecting the whole affair."

"All in all, we are about as safe as we could be. As long as there is one non-believer somewhere near us."

"It is a good thing," remarked Koosh. "The Earthmen might resent us if they knew of our presence."

"Yes," Thuko abruptly dismissed the subject and said, "I am increasingly aware of the pangs of hunger. Perhaps we could best launch our sojourn on Earth with a festive orgy at some food emporium."

Koosh liked the idea and forthwith they hopped off in search of a supermarket, of which they had heard much from returning vacationers. Enough to start them drooling in anticipation.

In the first two blocks they bounded past a dozen or more pedestrians, each of whom paid them no attention.

Five blocks more and they found what they were looking for. It bore the name of a well-known chain, though the colorful sign was meaningless to the Shisti and his assistant, since the Martians had never taken the trouble to learn any of Earth's multifarious languages, either written or spoken.

They entered, and at once their organs of scent were assailed by such a profusion of saliva inspiring odors that Koosh all but

collapsed in an ague of rapture. He grasped a wheeled contrivance for support.

Thuko wasted no time in such preliminaries, but hopped frantically down the aisle into the produce department, grabbed a huge cabbage and began eating with all the gusto of a circus fat lady down to her last three hundred pounds.

Nearby the produce clerk leaned drowsily against the sacked potato display, enjoying the respite offered by a mid-morning slack period. Oblivious to the theft of the cabbage and the crunching sounds resultant therefrom, he speculatively eyed an under-dressed blonde tripping by the window.

Thuko finished the vegetable and without pause started on a stalk of bananas. Meanwhile, in another aisle, Koosh had discovered the delights of Gro-Pup and was well into his second box. There was a lifetime of near-starvation to counterbalance, and if that could be done in one short year this voracious team would obviously accomplish it.

They moved slowly along the shelves, stowing away incredible amounts of food and drink. When at last their paths met in the canned goods section, Thuko picked up one of the cylindrical objects and stared at it, thinking. Koosh waited patiently. A minute passed and it seemed the problem would defeat the Assistant Shisti. But then his eye was caught by the butcher wielding a cleaver on a side of beef.

Bells rang in Thuko's head. He hopped behind the meat counter, obtained a second cleaver from its hanging place and returned. Great was his triumph as he lopped off the tops of two of the containers, spattering Koosh with stewed tomatoes. With hunger redoubled by the delay, the Martians emptied can after can of fruits, vegetables, juices and meats, tossing the decapitated tins behind them in the aisle.

A plumpish woman shopper approached, waddling along unhurriedly, pausing occasionally to squint at a grocery list and take an item from the shelves. As she neared Koosh and Thuko, she reached out for a can of peas and in so doing brought her hand against the back of Koosh's head.

Koosh grunted in annoyance and moved his head out of the way. The woman made another try and this time secured the can

of peas. She placed it in her cart and moved on, apparently unaware that anything out of the ordinary had happened.

Not much later she would develop leprosy. For that, incredible as it seems, was just how every leper throughout time had contracted the disease. By coming in accidental contact with a vacationing Martian.

The Martians did not know of it, of course. But even if they had, it would have made no difference to them. Should it be their worry if a blundering Earthian caught from them an incurable ailment? One which to them was not even a disease? Obviously not.

The Shisti and his assistant went on eating, squealing in delight with the first delicious taste of each new food.

THE beginning of their second day on Earth found Koosh and Thuko hopping along the street in quest of new pleasures. The air was damp and raw. Overhead a leaden sky threatened the world below, hinting at the unpleasant equinoctial weather soon to come. But the two Martians took no notice, accustomed as they were to the awful winds and cold of their home planet. This was paradise in comparison.

Koosh reddled a little song with his eye-stalks as they bounded through downtown traffic, but took care not to lose himself in it to the point of coming down in the path of one of the whizzing cars. The terrifying machines did not need to believe in their existence to smash them to bloody pulp.

In front of a swank hotel, Thuko called a halt and motioned with a tendril. "This would be a likely place to find thrilling luxuries. My friend Yemma told me that on his vacation he lived a month in the kitchen of one of these structures and when he came out was so fat he could scarcely hop."

Koosh dribbled spittle. "Wonderful, wonderful. We shall outdo Yemma. We shall spend three months and come out fat even in our tendrils!"

Thuko opened the door and they entered. The lobby was empty except for a clerk behind the desk, who was at the moment engrossed in a newspaper. Ignoring him, they crossed the room in panic haste as a faint but delectable fragrance floated

into their scent organs.

The spacious dining hall was crowded with humanity. At one table a tall, thin man was speaking into a microphone, while all eyes turned in his direction. Most raptly attentive of all were the great number of youthful diners, who seemed to regard the speaker with an awe that bordered on worship.

Cnto this scene came Koosh and Thuko, hot on the trail of eatables and drinkables. Spying the door to the kitchen, they hurried toward it between the tables, gabbling at each other in passionate conjecture at the delicacies awaiting them.

They were little prepared for the furor that followed.

It began at the first table they passed. A woman sitting there glanced their way, pointed at them, opened her mouth in a piercing scream and fainted dead away on the floor.

The man with her jumped to his feet, shouting something in a hoarse voice. It sounded like: "They're here! It's finally happened! Now let's see them call us crazy!"

Others stood up, attracted by the hubbub. They craned to see; and when they did, they too began yelling and gesticulating, until the dining hall was one vast sea of sound and motion.

The Shisti and his assistant hesitated, hopped forward again, stopped finally in utter confusion. For the first time on this planet, fear caught at them. Could this truly be? Was it really possible that they had been detected? Did all of these humans believe in the Martians' existence?

Plainly, they did.

"We must flee, Koosh!" Thuko bawled in terror. "Return to the ship!" And suiting action to words, he turned and went leaping back the way they had come. Koosh followed close on his heel, with an alacrity unusual for that individual.

"Wait! Wait, please!" someone called. "We won't harm you!"

Others took it up. But of course Koosh and Thuko did not understand. They rushed on. And the crowd poured after them like a tidal wave, pleading with them to stop.

Through the lobby, out the front entrance, down the steps, the Martians hopped with speed born of desperation. They started

across the street, unheeding of the traffic, intent only on escape from their howling pursuers. Consequently they did not see the huge truck bearing down on them.

Nor did the driver of the truck see them. Not that he was unalert. No, it was merely that he did not believe in Martians. Just as dozens of other motorists and pedestrians close around did not believe in them.

The truck rolled forward. There was a crunching, squishing sound. A blue fluid splattered over the hood and chunks of spongy flesh rained down under the wheels as the delicately built aliens came apart in a thousand pieces. An eye-stalk, twitching violently, bounced off the cab roof.

The truck rumbled on, the driver whistling a cheery tune. Bits of Koosh and Thuko rode with him, caught in the grill. So ended the Shisti and Assistant Shisti's vacation on Earth . . .

Most of the diners had gone back into the hotel. They had stood for an indecisive moment, looking this way and that. Baffled by the disappearance of the alien beings, they had straggled inside one by one. Few words were spoken among them, since each was mentally busy forming a theory to explain the occurrence.

Two of those who dallied behind, both youths, had already come up with explanations, and were telling them to each other

with great zealously and many a gesture.

"Listen," said Bicks. "I tell you they used invisibility belts. Something got out of whack with them just when those beings entered the dining hall and we saw them. They high-tailed it, working on the belts as they ran. By the time they reached the street, they had them repaired. Zap!—just like that, they were invisible again and we lost them. It's simple."

"It's too simple," said Paul scornfully. "Why would both belts conk out at once? My idea is that they came out of another dimension. Looking Earth over for conquest, maybe. But when they found themselves in the hotel surrounded by a lot of people—we'd be monsters to them, you know—they got panicky and ran. Then they recovered, switched on whatever gadget they use, and returned to their own dimension. I'd bet my life that's the real answer."

Bicks didn't agree. He ridiculed the theory, improvised a joke about it. His companion answered hotly. Immersed in argument they walked slowly up the hotel steps.

Both glanced briefly at the large banner stretched above the door. The banner which read:

WELCOME TO THE CHICON II!  
10th WORLD SCIENCE-FICTION  
CONVENTION

## THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 3)

Mmmmmmm! You admit being the third party by your own hand. (Naturally, no fan is going to admit it!)

So long, Mr. O'Sullivan, it was nice talking to you. (You can oil that squeak now!)

CAROL MCKINNEY

Ed's note: I sq'@1fb-&"@l"\* HI?&.@&\*—Darnit, even the oil-robot has fled these beleaguered halls.

### GIVE A MILE, TAKE A MILE

63 Glenridge Ave.  
St. Catharines, Ont.  
Canada.

Dear Ed,

Before going any further, I'd like to call to your attention an obvious error in your Febish—CHICKEN FARM. We'll stretch a point and assume that the newly found planet hadn't been yet discovered. As

Rocklynne so put, "forty million miles above the elliptic . . . he found it . . . even though most celestial bodies had been discovered." Well with space travel so far advanced, Earth would at least have a Lunar observatory, and a 100-inch telescope up there is as good as a 300-inch on Earth. Next. Being 450 miles in diameter, it would certainly reflect light . . . wait! Only 450 miles in diameter?!! Great galloping ghos!!! At that distance from the sun (ever try walking forty million miles?) it would have been thrown out into deep space by centrifugal force long ago. Looking over an old ish of Sarge Saturn, I notice that he almost boiled a fan in Xeno for bringing up an elementary physics error like this. I hope STF has grown up enuf so that if you try to bring to the editor's mind that Earth is the third planet from the sun (or some such thing) instead of the second, you won't be censored for "lack of imagination!"

I believe that if BERSERKER had been made the lead novel, with about 12,000 more words tacked on to it, the whole Febish of Planet would have been greatly improved. I wouldn't call WARLOCK OF SHARRADOR a "novel." But outside of that, the two novelets were individually, jointly, and severally better than the lead novel, which for all I care can



take its sffari on a safari somewhere remote in a Venusian jungle and GET LOST. Hummph.

Now turning to PLANET's short, AMOUR, AMOUR, DEAR PLANET, I must say that it was one of the best shorts that P. S. has had in many a moon. It was a very competently done take-off on weird and fantastic, but ridiculous, cults that seem to be popping up nowadays. It was a truly splendid satire, with that undercurrent of humor that will make any story a well-read story. If there is one thing I admire science-fiction for it, it is the ability of its authors to turn a seemingly normal or precarious situation into a riotous and complex one. Wilcox did it with GIANTS OF MOGO, although the novelty wears off the longer the story. True literature is to be enjoyed, not tolerated.

Yours,

JOE KEOGH

## MIRAGE?

Box 89  
Runnemedede, N. J.  
January 2, 1952

Dear Editor:

Your 3-in-1 policy in re Bryan Berry has been topped. The June 1947 issue of AMAZING STORIES had every story in the issue by Richard S. Shaver. There were four stories—all novelet or short novel length, too. But as for Berry—sure, you can compare him to Bradbury; sure, just like you can compare a carbon copy on yellow second sheets to an original on 24 lb. bond. If Berry is so darned good why hasn't ASTOUNDING, GALAXY, or F & SF heard of him? I think you're grasping at straw here, Mr. O'Sullivan, but it doesn't really matter. If you can convince enough people that Berry is good then it is almost the same as if he really was. You can't convince me.

Cordially,

DAVE HAMMOND

## TWISTS-ITE

932 Lanterman Avenue  
Youngstown, Ohio

Dear Editor:

Just finished PLANET for January of 53, and lo, I break this silence of many months, take typewriter in hand, and pen this missive. (This is what is called a contradiction in terms.)

Anyway, Perused La Vizi first off, of course, and duly noted Mr. Taylor's letter. I agree with him wholeheartedly in his praise of Charles Dye's THE MAN WHO STAKED THE STARS. Lo (that again?) I am ashamed I did not write in at the time to commend this very excellent, well-written, tightly-plotted story. It was indeed well above PLANET's average—which I hope will, under your direction, Mr. O'Sullivan, rise steadily until a story like this will not seem unusual in your pages. By all means, let us have more Dye, preferably of novel length.

DESIGN FOR GREAT-DAY easily takes first place in the Jan. ish. More from Russell also, please. The rest of the stories line up thusly and so:

2. THE SUN-DEATH
3. OH MESMERIST FROM MIMAS!
4. GROUNDLING
5. THE FINAL VENUSIAN
6. THE IMAGINATIVE MAN
7. WAR DRUMS OF MERCURY LOST.

Who is this Bryan Berry? I remember no mention of him in any previous issues; in this ish the only things said in regard to him were, "3 Startling Stories by Bryan Berry, PLANET's Great New Fiction Find" (spine), "3 Strange World Stories by a

New Author" (cover) and "Short Stories by A New Author" (contents). No mention of the boy elsewhere. Not even a five-line biographical sketch. He could be a vice-president's decrepit 96-year-old uncle, an 11-year-old elementary school pupil, your sister's son. Or maybe a high-school sophomore. (Ugh.) His stories weren't bad. This boy may develop into something.

How about having an interplanetary cover for a change? We've been presented with inevitable Triangles and Giant Women Staring Down Upon the Hero for the last 20 or 30 issues. Some people may like this, but Anderson's paint-pot pourings do get a bit boring. (They say Robert Gibson Jones, in painting his "other-world" scenes, pours paint around on a canvas until he sees a possibility, then works it into a picture. Anderson obviously pours paint around on the canvas. Period.)

Let's have a Galactic War-Intrigue In the Imperial Court-Star Empire Against Star Empire Story. PLANET's lacked these for quite a while. I think the last really good one was FLAME-JEWEL OF THE ANCIENTS a couple of years ago. That was hot, boy. That was jazzy.

REGIS J. MURPHY

Ed's note: Honest, son, this Bryan Berry fellow might well be the Man From Mars via England where he now resides, for all the biographical data we have on him. He does write letters. And he does sign his name. And he does write STF book-lengths. So he must be human. . . . And then again, maybe????????

## RUSSELL-DAY!

Str. Angeline  
Marine Post Office  
Detroit 22, Michigan

Dear Ed:

I never throw a brick-bat by mail because if I don't like a story after the first two pages, I just don't finish it. So this is to compliment you (and the author) on what I consider a masterpiece of wit, philosophy, characterization, plot and plain old-fashioned story telling. This is my reaction to DESIGN FOR GREAT-DAY in the Jan. number, by Eric Frank Russell. I nominate it for an anthology. The sermon behind it (obviously a sly dig at the present-day blundering homo-sapiens) would have been stuffy without the most subtle and belly-chuckle-sense-of-humor I've ever encountered in science-fiction.

Seems to me that Russell unconsciously described himself in the following quotation from the yarn: "If the Solarian mass mind had a special compartment reserved for flights of vocal fancy duly embellished with pointed witticisms it was without doubt located on a dump called Terra."

I'd like to read more from this tongue-in-check master of pointed witticisms.

Best wishes,

JOHN A. SPOOLMAN

Ed's note: Agree 100 percent. In fact a fellow with Lawson's (the chief character) potentialities is worth more than a single story. Maybe the New Year will bring with it a new Russell gem.

## IN A NUTSHELL

2450—76 Avenue  
Phila. 38, Penna.

Dear Ed:

After four months of reading *Galaxy*, *Mag.* of *Fantasy* and *SF*, *ASF*, etc., etc., I finally bought the Jan. ish of PLANET STORIES. I usually get in one

of these moods around every four or five months, and come back to the old dependable space opera mags.

Now don't get me wrong, PLANET is a good mag, as good space opera mags go. That is, I think PLANET is the leader of the space opera mags. Let's clarify that statement. There's been thousands upon thousands of western stories written, most of which were just plain trash; but there's been a few that were real classics.

The same holds true for detective, love and adventure stories. The same goes for space opera.

PLANET STORIES gets the best of the lot. . . .

I'm not saying that all the stories you print are good; you get quite a few lousy ones too.

Take the present ish, the only ones worth mentioning are DESIGN FOR GREAT-DAY, OH MESMERIST FROM MIMAS!, and THE FINAL VENUSIAN. The other four stories were pretty awful.

That brings us to the question "How to improve a SF mag." . . . If you're a spendthrift and can afford it, you'll go about doing it this way.

1. Small (digest) size.
2. Slick paper (trimmed edges naturally).
3. Illustrations—Finlay, Cartier, etc. . . .
4. Stories—Asimov, Heinlein, Bradbury, Van Vogt, etc. . . .
5. Front and back covers in color.
6. So on, and so on, and so on . . . (you get the idea).

Now this is the way "you" should go about it.

1. Covers and interior illustrations—When someone wants to really read a SF mag he or she doesn't give a darn about the cover and illustrations. Therefore use the same artists you now have.

2. Same size.
3. Same paper.
4. Same everything but reading matter. No matter how beautiful a SF mag may look, if it doesn't have good stories it's not worth the space it takes up. Your mag is dedicated to space opera, or action stories if you prefer. If you keep the same format you now have and get good action stories, PLANET STORIES will be one of the leaders in the SF field. There's no need in getting the trimmed edges, and the Finlay illustrations, and the slick paper, just the stories, that's all that counts.

After all, the stories are what makes or breaks a mag. Let's hope it makes PLANET STORIES. . . .

LYLE KESSLER

## QUESTIONNAIRE

385 North 8th East St.,  
Provo, Utah

Dear Jack:

So the vultures descended via the mails—poor Berry—has anyone asked how he feels about all this ruckus over his three stories in one ish? Personally, though I didn't get in the melee at the time, I thought one was rather good, one fairly good, and one fair. For my vote, you can go right ahead and print the whole ish of PS to include the works of one author, if you want to! Such a fuss over nothing! If you'd listed two other pen names no one would have known the difference.

I have a couple of l'il suggestions, ed:

List the date when the next ish will be on sale.  
Print the number of words after the story title on the contents page.

Use the backcover for something besides advertising—perhaps astronomy photos and info, some great (and I said great) STF art work, or perhaps just a photo of yourself, suitable for framing.

GET SOME DECENT COVERS ON PS, and I

don't mean just put more clothes on the gal. Put some on that any STF fan would be proud to collect for themselves alone.

Letters:

1. Shirley Cotter; (2) Alice Bullock; (3) Janet Hathaway.

What? ? Only 6 pages of Vizi? ? Oh, come now! You can do better than that! ! Let's always have at least 10 or 12. All those in favor deluge ye eddie with letters. (How many letters do you get each ish, Jack?)

WHEN ARE YOU GOING MONTHLY? ? ? ?

The March ish was fairly good but didn't come up to the Jan. standard. RICARDO'S VIRUS was the best of the short stories, in fact—of all of them.

What month and year did the first ish of PS appear?

Yours for better covers,

CAROL MCKINNEY

Ed's note: Well, quiz-mistress, here goes: (1) Listing date of next ish is fine idea. Will do. (2) Listing story wordage would be cumbersome and headachish, and I do not quite see any point to it. Explain. (3) A photo of the poisonous editor on the back cover might possibly corrode entire magazine before delivery. (Did someone say, "Good"? ) (4) Vizi-length depends on you writers. Keep 'em comin'. (5) Monthly? Will speak to publisher next time they unlock my door. (6) Spring 1942.

## SUCCESS—COSMOS WIDE

63 Glenridge Ave.,  
St. Catharines, Ont.

Dear Jack,

For the first time in many moons I have decided to send PLANET STORIES an editorial epistle. Hearken!

The first thing that drew me near to the Jan. issue of the mag was the cover. The cover (as all covers are supposed to do) whether appealing to men via sex or science, drew me closer. It really stood out on the stands. Andy deserves a big hand for it. It wasn't so much the story in it, but the color effect he used to achieve it. A weird, smoky bluish haze over everything—then, a dazzling red figure sticking out from the midst of blue-skinned sirens. Hooray!

The issue was pretty good all round, and a good thing, too. PLANET has been slipping lately, and if she wants to retain her place of honor in STFdom, her stories will have to be of good quality. Especially the names. You might have a good story, but few who are deciding which mag to plunk their quarter on usually look in the index (unless they're crazy!) to see if those authors are there. One of the most plausible reasons why PLANET has held on through the years is that she has one of the most plausible names. Right? Anyway, on with the issue.

The illos for the Jan. ish were all up to par—and a couple noticeably over. These were Emsh's. In his design for DESIGN FOR GREAT DAY (catch the pun?) the artist did a perfect job of conveying to the reader Lawson's character . . . proud, happy-go-lucky, but underneath it all a smug self-satisfaction that showed his intelligence. Now, editor allowing, we'll go on to the stories.

1. DESIGN FOR GREAT DAY—Eric Frank Russell has done a great job on this one—positively superb (please excuse all over-enthusiastic adjectives). Now don't get delicious, Jack. Some people DO like your stories once in a while. Russell's style reminds me of Van Vogt, since he uses characterization and explains the actions of his characters (a

worthy virtue). Could you ensnare Russell to do another job of this boy Lawson?

2. MESMERIST FROM MIMAS—There have been a lot of stories with hypnotic animals before, but I for one have never seen the idea approached so well and from such angles. Especially so re. the author's explanation of their mating life. (Smileys, that is)

3. SUN-DEATH—Stereotyped plot, but some humor with the drunk McVane.

4. FINAL VENUSIAN—This Bryan Berry has definite possibilities. His stories are fair, with the odd new idea cast about. If he'd work in a little more action he'd soon become one of the great names. 'Twould go over bigger, too.

5, 6, 7, and Aleph Null—The rest were stories. Fairly readable, but nothing startling, new or out of this world (except the locale). If I could say anything about them, it'd be critical. THE IMAGINATIVE MAN, if classified in your book as STF, (out-rageous) should make your bubble burst any day now, with angry comments from the fen. The story belonged in a fairy tale book. All it was concerned about was seeing a bunch of mythological weirdies ... the rocket-ship crash was identical. Well, I've got to go now—

JOE KEOGH

## INSIDE AND OUT

Sweet Springs, Mo.

Dear Editor,

Subject, the Vizigraph, (PLANET, Jan. issue)—As one who has scanned the readers' page of many STF mags I know that a letter from Dave Hammond may be counted upon to contain words of wisdom, his contribution this issue was no exception, a superb insight into writing and its various faculties. I agree completely with Dave ... keep PLANET STORIES in the action department, there is now a surplus of mags dealing with this "matu" fiction which oftentimes is as dull and uninteresting as the reading of a phone directory. Give No. 1 pt. to Dave Hammond.

Mavis Hartman, girl BEM, earns second pic with her surprising theory on space travel. Third place goes to Mrs. Mary Corby for her spirited defense of her philosophy towards "collecting." I'm sure that Gregg Calkins is properly chastized by now (Gregg, old boy, you should KNOW better than to try and win an argument from a WOMAN).

Naaman Peterson's letter brought to mind something I've been wanting to ask for 'lo those many moons. To wit ... What ever happened to all the delightful "nuts" that used to enlighten La Viz with their "deathless prose." No more do we have the wonderful, senseless creations that began in this vein ... "Dear Eddy-tore, mounting my blue tailed Worpel and sticking out my massive chest (size 22) I venture forth in quest of wine, women, and a copy of PLANET. Suddenly I see it, a 9-legged mush-mouth Mercurian with a copy of ole PS in his talons. From the weapons hanging at my side I select my favorite the ZOOP gun (it sprays liquid chlorophyll interspaced with meat balls) etc, etc."

Before I close, a word concerning the art department. More VESTAL, More VESTAL, we want Vestal, etc, etc (Get it? H. B. Vestal we want already ... ) This WOOD that did the illo for WAR DRUMS OF MERCURY LOST is very, very good. Hang on to him. Let Frank Kelly Freas do a cover. His covers for WT are "out of this World." Other suggestions ... Get Poul Anderson back, lots more material from Leigh Brackett and Stan Mullen please. Also ... I plead with you, go monthly

please. No excuses now, you can do it. Remember STF is in its greatest boom period.

Regards,

PAUL MITTELBUSCHER

Ed's note: The "nut" letter has long been a bone of contention among our readers. A few favor them; many are opposed. I reckon it's all a matter of what underlies the sass. If a writer has a point to make, and can make it via the "nut," "funny" or "sassy" type of prose, so much to the good. Otherwise, I suggest, skip it.

## OTHER WORLDS—OTHER MAGS

Rt. 3 Box 68-A  
Kannapolis, N. C.

Dear Editor,

Congratulations on your new reprint magazine TOPS IN SCIENCE FICTION. There will probably be a flood of requests from readers for their own favorites so I will put in my two bits. You have a great number of stories that need reprinting. A few stand out in my memory.

Here are a few that I, and all older readers of PLANET will never forget. THE ULTIMATE SALIENT and BEYOND LIGHT by Nelson S. Bond. VASSALS OF THE MASTER WORLD and ONE THOUSAND MILES BELOW by Eando Binder. I hope you continue to use the old Paul illustrations and get new ones if possible by the old master.

As you know many great stories appeared in the ACTION STORIES, PLANET's companion Magazine. When I started reading PLANET my allowance would not stand buying a magazine to get an average of one S.F. yarn per issue. As a consequence I missed a lot of classics. Perhaps some of your readers never knew of these stories. Please don't overlook these great stories in your future issues. I remember reading the ad in PLANET of one novel in particular. It was THE DESTROYERS FROM MARS by Eando Binder. I am hoping to see it in a early issue.

Best wishes for your new magazine.

Sincerely,

NED REECH

## AH, THOSE BELOVED RE-READERS

4736 Drexel Blvd.  
Chicago, Ill.

Dear Editor,

I imagine you and Bryan Berry are sitting on the edge of your chairs wondering what will be the reader reaction to PLANET's new "discovered" author. However, a few words about LA VIZI.

Give first prize in the Jan. issue to Dave Hammond. Such literacy combined with common sense is rare indeed. Second to Jerry Taylor for his sincere enthusiasm. As a result of his letter I have reread THE MAN WHO STAKED THE STARS and revised my opinion of the story upward. After thinking about it awhile, I'm willing to grant that it is one of the best stories of this year of best stories. Third to Mrs. Mary Corby, tho her idea of the "typical active fan" collecting everything published in the field is fantastic. I have been an active fan for ten years and have known personally, or through amateur magazines and the U. S. Mail, nearly all the fans who were active in this period. Not more than ten or twenty of these, at most, have been real "completests." Some of the most active amateur publishers and letter writers only buy three or four mags a

month and throw them away when they finish reading them.

Mavis Hartman tempts me to be a "scoffer" beyond my power to resist with her theory that the flying saucers are "circle-wing spaceships" dating from about 1944, originating here on Earth, and powered by the breaking up of water into hydrogen and oxygen. This theory fails to fit the facts in two ways. First, it does not account for saucer sightings before 1944; sightings which run back at least 150 years. Second it does not account for saucer sightings ships and other things that were not "circle winged." Also, a minor detail; the breaking down of water into hydrogen and oxygen is not a "complicated process." It is simple electrolysis, a process which could never be used for power since it produces none. Indeed, it requires that power be PUT IN.

That was a nice grandstand play, Miss "Don't write me personally" Hartman, but all you succeeded in doing was making a fool of yourself.

Tom Piper's plea for covers with no fems gives me a pain. Why doesn't he go off someplace with a copy of "fairy" tales and leave us alone with our nasty old females?

Now to Bryan Berry.

Yes, I think he is a good find.

However, if he intends to write like Bradbury about Bradbury's pet topics, he must not only equal the "master," but surpass him, or he will not escape the name of "copy-cat." So far, he has not beaten Bradbury "at his own game." I liked the stories, tho, except for GROUNDLING. I would rather read ten good imitations of Bradbury than one story by certain other writers who are being their own dull selves.

Berry does very well as what Jack Woodford calls a "word mechanic." His stories are by far the best things in the ish, and if ye ed continues to buy his stories, I will certainly not cease reading PLANET. I would say that if and when he graduates from the Bradburian School, he will be right up there with the best of them, but until that time he would do well to realize that Bradbury's sort of story cannot be done really well unless actually felt by the author. Do you, Bryan, really feel as Bradbury does, that the intelligent, decent people are a near-powerless minority; that the human race is doomed to either suicide or atrocity of the brain; that we aren't decent enough to be allowed on other planets? If not, don't try to write like Bradbury. You will never even come close.

YETZ,

RADELL FARADAY NELSON, BEM

P.S. DESIGN FOR GREAT-DAY was a fine story in spite of the excess explanatory material.

## SKULL-BOY

546 Ellis  
Wichita 9, Kansas

Dear Editor;

Thanks for the offer of an illustration. I would like to transfer my right of choice to Betty Curtis who lives, I believe, at 201 Veterans Village, Canton, New York.

I have a bone to pick with Mavis Hartman over her very demure and lady-like suggestion that I get into a game of Russian Roulette. Mother raised me to always do what a lady wishes, so I picked up the old .45 and gave it a try. It went off on the third

spin and I was smacked on the side of the skull. Unfortunately, those little dimpled darlings of fen had been pounding me over the head with the club of their invective so that my skull had acquired the physical characteristics of high-grade armor plate.

Naturally, the bullet caromed off my noggin and fashioned an ugly hole in the ceiling. Now, when it rains, I place a dishpan under the hole to catch the drip. Since it is all Miss Hartman's fault, do you not think that she should pay for repairing the roof?

Ron Anger has an interesting point on the subject of history repeating itself. That is correct . . . except, of course, details often change. The story he speaks of has other solar systems taken over to protect our solar system. But remember that the stars and planets move in three dimensions. So, to provide outposts, every star system in a sphere of perhaps ten parsecs would have to be taken over.

Immediately every point on that sphere would be vulnerable to attack thus forcing the Empire-minded to keep expanding on the surface of a sphere . . . and the more it expanded the more vulnerable it would become, until it collapsed of its own size.

By the same token you could not make an outpost of Pluto since an enemy could attack from any direction, especially when Earth was on the other side of the sun. If, on the other hand, you put a spherical net of outposts beyond Pluto's orbit most of the population of Earth would be required to man them. So who would pay taxes?

As to his remarks about Cecil Rhodes and other Empire-builders, I might point out that everything he has or hopes to have is due to some Empire-builder. For every savage killed by Rhodes and others, a hundred died at the orders of native chiefs and witch doctors. Moreover, the law and order that came in the wake of the Empire-builders preserved a thousand lives for each one taken in gaining a foothold.

Mr. Anger overlooks the hospitals, schools, missions, law courts, etc, established in Africa, while he also overlooks cannibalism, fetish-worship, human sacrifice, slave raiding etc, that have, since time immemorial, drenched all Africa in a sea of human blood. Thus, Mr. Anger overlooks the vices of one and the virtues of the other and draws conclusions from only one side of the matter. The important thing is not what Cecil Rhodes, et al, did but what would have happened if they didn't. I suggest Mr. Anger think it over . . . and not in anger.

Respectfully,

EDWIN SIGLER

## BER-FAN

18 Lombardy St.  
Brooklyn 22, N. Y.

Dear Editor;

I have just read a couple of stories in the Jan. '53 ish. The Berry blurbs aroused my curiosity, so I read the stories. All three of them. Keep Berry; he's good.

I also noticed that Wally Wood is drawing for you. Keep him, too.

On page 45 I saw a typical Vestal illo. Gahhh . . . John W. Jakes is a pen name for Poul Anderson, right? I turned to page 62 and Anderson fairly oozed out the binding.

Yours truly,

BARBARA ANN GOLDBLATT

Ed's note: Born under the same star, perhaps, but two different persons.

# NEW BODIES FOR OLD!



**I've Made New Men Out of  
Thousands of Other Fellows...**

**"Here's what I did for  
THOMAS MANFRE...and  
what I can do for you!"**

*-Charles Atlas*



GIVE me a skinny, peepless, second-rate body—and I'll cram it so full of handsome, bulging new muscle that your friends will grow bug-eyed! . . . I'll wake up that sleeping energy of yours and make it hum like a high-powered motor! Man, you'll feel and look different! You'll begin to LIVE!

## Let Me Make YOU a NEW MAN— IN JUST 15 MINUTES A DAY

You wouldn't believe it, but I myself used to be a 97-lb. weakling. Fellows called me "Skinny." Girls snickered and made fun of me behind my back. I was a flop. THEN I discovered my marvelous new muscle-building system—"Dynamic Tension." And it turned me into such a complete specimen of MANHOOD that today I hold the title "THE WORLD'S MOST PERFECTLY DEVELOPED MAN."

### ARE YOU

Skinny and  
run down?  
Always  
tired?  
Nervous?  
Lacking in  
Confidence?  
Constipated?  
Suffering  
from bad  
breath?

### What to Do

About It  
is told in my  
free book!

### What is "Dynamic Tension"? How Does It Work?

When you look in  
the mirror and see a  
healthy, hunky, strapping  
fellow smiling

back at you — then  
you'll realize how fast  
"Dynamic Tension"  
GETS RESULTS!

"Dynamic Tension"  
is the easy, NATURAL  
method you can practice  
in the privacy of  
your own room—JUST  
15 MINUTES EACH  
DAY — while your  
scrawny chest and  
shoulder muscles begin  
to swell, ripple . . .  
those epindly arms and legs of yours  
bulge . . . and your whole body starts to  
feel "alive," full of zip and go!

### One Postage Stamp May Change Your Whole Life!

Sure, I gave Thomas Manfre (shown above)  
a NEW BODY. But he's just one of thousands.  
I'm steadily building broad-shouldered, dynamic  
MEN—day by day—the country over.

3,000,000 fellows, young  
and old have already snatched  
a postage stamp to ask  
for my FREE book. They  
wanted to read and see for  
themselves how I built up  
scrawny bodies, and how I  
pate down fat, flabby ones  
—how I turn them into big-  
man dynamos of pure MAN-  
POWER.



Atlas Cham-  
pionship Cup  
won by Thom-  
as Manfre, one  
of Charles  
Atlas' pupils.

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Strength"—32 pages, crammed with actual  
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better build. I understand this book is  
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obligate me in any way.

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swers every vital question. Page by page it shows what I  
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has trained more men  
for Radio-TV  
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## YOU PRACTICE SERVICING with Kits I Send You

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